







LETTERS TO EUGENIA,

ON THE

ABSURD, CONTRADICTIONARY, AND DEMORALIZING

DOGMAS AND MYSTERIES

OF THE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION,

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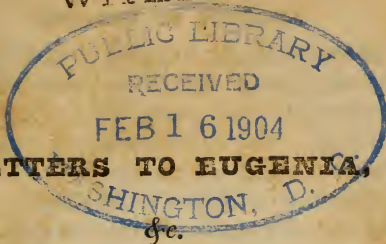
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LETTERS TO EUGENIA,
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LETTER I.

HAD not your letter, Madam, contained so strong a confirmation of the troubles that agitate you, I should nevertheless have easily recognized the work of superstition. That alone is capable of alarming honest minds, without calming the passions of the corrupt, and suffices forever to annihilate repose from the heart, of which it once obtains the possession.

Yes, Madam, I have long known the melancholy effects of religious prejudices, and I now intend to speak to you with freedom respecting them. Perhaps, at first view, my ideas may appear strange, but on a closer examination they will cease to shock you. In a mind like yours, reason, sincerity and truth will always possess their rights.

Your goodness, candour and sincerity, prevent you from suspecting in others any thing like fraud or malignity. The mildness of your disposition prevents you from contradicting notions that would appear to you revolting, if you deign-

ed to examine them; but you would rather refer to the judgment of others, and subscribe to their ideas, than consult your own reason and understanding. The vivacity of your imagination makes you seize with eagerness the dark pictures presented to you; interested men avail themselves of your sensibility in order to alarm you; they see you shudder at the terrible names of *death, judgment, hell, punishment, and eternity*; they strike you with awe at the name of an inflexible *Judge*, whose decrees are unchangeable. You imagine you see around you demons that are made the ministers of vengeance on his feeble creatures. Thus is your mind in continual alarm; each instant you are afraid of unknowingly offending a capricious God, who is always threatening and revengful. If you be consistent in your principles, every moment of a life which would have been remarkable only for its contentment and peace, will soon be infected with inquietudes, scruples, and panic terrors, from which a mind like yours ought for ever to have been exempted. The agitation into which these fatal ideas have thrown you, suspends the use of your faculties; your reason is drawn aside by a wandering imagination; you fall into perplexity, lowness of spirits and self-distrust, and you thus become the dupe of men, who, by addressing themselves to our imagination and deafening our reason, have long since succeeded in subjugating the universe, and in persuading rational beings that their reason is either useless or dangerous.

Such, Madam, is the constant language of the

apostles of superstition, whose project has been, and always will be, to annihilate human reason, in order that their authority over mankind may be exercised with impunity.

— Every where have the perfidious ministers of revealed religion been either the avowed or the secret enemies of reason, because they always found reason in opposition to their views. They have every where decried it, fearing it would destroy their empire, by discovering their plots and the futility of their fables. They have every where endeavoured to erect on its ruins the empire of fanaticism and imagination. To make sure of success, they have continually alarmed mankind by hideous representations—they have astonished and seduced them by wonders and mysteries; they have embarrassed them by enigmas and uncertainties; overloaded them with duties and ceremonies, and filled their minds with scruples and superstitious fears. We have only to open our eyes to perceive the disgraceful means made use of by political priestcraft, to stifle the aspiring reason of man. In his infancy he is taught to respect tales that are ridiculous, impertinent, contradictory, and wicked; he is then familiarized by degrees with inconceivable mysteries, which are announced to him as sacred truths.

You have no occasion to blush, Madam, for a weakness which you possess in common with every one around you, and from which the greatest men are not always exempt. Let your courage, then, be reanimated, and dare to examine with coolness the phantoms that alarm

you. In a case so interesting to your peace, consult this enlightened reason, which places you as much above the vulgar, as it places the human species above all other animals. Leave inquietude and remorse to those profligate women who feel self-reproach, or who have crimes to expiate. Leave superstition to those ignorant females, whose narrow minds are incapable of reflection.

Do not tell me, Madam, that your understanding is too feeble to sound the depths of theology. Do not tell me in the language of our priests that religious truths are mysteries which we must adopt in silent adoration, without being able to understand them. By speaking in this way, do you not see that they prescribe and condemn this religion to which they pretend to subject you? — Whatever is supernatural was not intended for man to know, and whatever is out of the reach of his knowledge ought not to occupy his attention.

To say that religion is superiour to reason is an acknowledgment that it was not intended for rational beings, and a confession that our Doctors know nothing about the wonders with which they daily entertain us.

If the truths of religion be as they assure us, necessary to all men, they ought to be clear and intelligible to all men. If the dogmas of this religion were as important as we are given to understand they are, they ought not only to be suited to the capacities of the doctors who preach them, but to all those who hearken to their discourses. Is it not very wonderful that

those whose profession it is to make themselves masters of the religion which they are to teach to others, acknowledge that its dogmas are above their own understanding, and yet are so obstinate as to inculcate to the people, what by their own confession they cannot comprehend?

Should we have much confidence in a physician, who after declaring that he did not understand his profession, should nevertheless boast of the excellence of his remedies? This however is daily performed by our spiritual quacks. By a strange fatuity, the most sensible people consent to be the dupes of those empirics, who are perpetually forced to acknowledge their profound ignorance.

But if the mysteries of religion are incomprehensible to those who teach them; if among those who profess it, none can be found who knows precisely either what he believes or can give any account of the motives of his belief and conduct, this is not the case with respect to the difficulties which we oppose to this religion. These are within the reach of all, and are so simple as to be capable of convincing every man who renounces the prejudices of childhood, and deigns to consult that common sense which nature has bestowed on each individual of the human race.

If you consult our doctors they will not fail to display the antiquity of their doctrine, which has always upheld itself in spite of the continual attacks of heretics, wicked men and infidels, and in spite of pagan persecution. You have too good an understanding not to perceive that the

antiquity of an opinion proves nothing in its favour. If antiquity were a proof of truth, Christianity would be forced to give way to Judaism, which for the same reason must yield to the religion of the Egyptians and Chaldeans, that is to say, to idolatry which was long anterior to Moses. It was believed for thousands of years that the sun turned round the earth, which remained stationary; and yet it is not the less true that the sun is fixed, and that the earth turns round the sun.

You are not calculated to be the dupe of names and authorities. You will be astounded with the multiplied testimony of many illustrious and learned men, who have not only admitted the Christian religion, but have been its most zealous defenders. You will be told of holy doctors, great philosophers, powerful reasoners, fathers of the church, and learned interpreters, who have successively supported this religious system. I shall not in this place contest their understandings, which are nevertheless frequently defective; I shall content myself with saying, that in religious matters the greatest geniuses are frequently less clear sighted than the people themselves; that they have not examined the opinions they taught, either because they regarded them as sacred, or because they had never traced the origin of their principles, which they would have found ruinous, after an unprejudiced consideration; or in short, because they saw themselves interested in the defence of a cause to which their own fortune was attached.

Thus is their testimony exceptionable, and their authority of no great weight.

With respect to interpreters and commentators, who have painfully laboured during so many ages to elucidate the divine laws; to explain the sacred writings of the Christians, and to fix the dogmas of faith, even their labours ought to make us suspect a religion founded on those books, and teaching those dogmas. They prove to us that works said to emanate from the Supreme Being, are obscure, unintelligible, and stand in need of human assistance to be understood by those to whom the Deity wished to discover his will. The laws of a wise God ought to be simple and clear: none but defective laws stand in need of interpretation.

It is not then to those interpreters to whom you must apply. It is to yourself; it is your own reason that you must consult. Your own happiness and welfare are at stake, and these objects are of too serious a nature for you to entrust to others the decision respecting them. If religion be a matter as important as it is asserted to be, it undoubtedly merits the greatest attention. If this religion must have an influence on the happiness of men in this world and the next, there is no affair of more lively interest, nor which consequently demands a more mature examination. Can any thing then be more strange than the conduct adopted by the greater part of mankind? Though perfectly convinced of the necessity of religion, and of its importance, yet never do they give themselves the trouble to examine it; they observe it from cus-

tom and habit; they never account to themselves for its dogmas; they revere it, they submit to it, and groan under its burthen, without asking themselves why they do so. In short they have recourse to others to examine for them, and those in whose judgment they put such blind trust, are precisely the persons whose decisions they ought to regard with suspicion. Priests have the right to judge exclusively, and without any appeal, the merits of a system evidently invented for their own emolument. ; But what do these priests say to us? Visibly interested in maintaining received opinions, they represent them to us as necessary to the public, as interesting and consoling to each of us, as intimately connected with morality, as indispensable to society; in a word, as being of the very first importance. After having thus prejudiced us in their favour, they immediately forbid us to examine matters so important to be known.— ; What are you to think of such conduct? You must conclude that they wish to deceive you; that they fear examination only because their religion cannot withstand it, and that they are afraid of reason, which might unveil the wicked projects of the priesthood to enslave the human race.

Thus Madam, I cannot too often repeat it, examine for yourself, make use of your own understanding, seek truth in the sincerity of your heart. silence prejudice, and be on your guard against habitual ceremonies. Bid defiance to imagination, and then in sincerity with your-

self you will weigh with a sure hand the opinions of religion.

From whatever source they spring, you will acquiesce only in what is convincing to your own reason, satisfactory to your understanding, conformable to sound morality, and approved of by a virtuous mind. You will reject with disdain what is contradictory to reason; you will cast from you with dread, such notions as are criminal and injurious to morality, and which religion strives to impose upon us as virtues that are supernatural and divine.

Wise and amiable Eugenia! — Rigorously examine the ideas which at your own request I intend to lay before you. — Do not suffer your confidence in me, nor your prejudice for my weak understanding, to blind you with respect to my opinions. I submit them to your judgment; discuss them, combat them, and do not yield, till you think you have discovered the truth.

My sentiments are not offered as so many oracles, nor are they like theological opinions, against which we are not permitted to make any appeal. If I have told the truth, adopt my ideas; if I be deceived, point out my errors; I am ready to acknowledge them, and to sign my own condemnation.

I shall esteem myself happy if my reflections contribute to restore you to that tranquillity of mind, which is so necessary to enable us to judge of things rationally, and without which there can be no happiness.

I shall enter into particulars in my second

Letter, and shall go back to the foundation. I flatter myself I shall prove to you, in the course of this correspondence, that the objects which theology endeavours to perplex and surround with darkness, in order to render them more sacred and respectable, are not only susceptible of being understood by you, but may even be fully comprehended by any one who enjoys the most ordinary share of common sense.

Should my freedom, Madam, appear too abrupt, you must consider that you are the cause of it. It was necessary to speak plainly. I thought myself obliged to oppose a violent and prompt remedy to the malady that had attacked you. Besides, I dare to hope, that in a short time you will thank me, for having shown you the truth in all its brightness; and that you will pardon me for having dispelled the incommodious phantoms that infested your mind. My efforts for your tranquillity will prove to you at least, the interest I feel in your happiness, and the respect with which

I am, &c.

LETTER II.

EVERY religion is a system of opinions and conduct, founded on the true or false notions which we form respecting the Deity.

To judge of the truth of a system, we must examine its principles, see if they be in agreement one with another, and ascertain that every part thereof is an additional support to that

system. For a religion to be true, it must give us true notions of God. It is only by the aid of our reason that it is possible for us to judge whether the attributes which theology ascribes to the Deity, be true or not; and truth, as it regards man, is nothing more than a conformity to reason. Thus we see it is the same reason, now attempted to be proscribed, which is alone capable of enabling us to judge of the truths that religion offers to us. The true God must be a God conformable to reason, and true worship cannot consist in any acts but those which reason approves.

Religion is important only in proportion to the advantages it procures for mankind. The best religion is that which enables those who profess it, to enjoy benefits that are real, substantial, and lasting. A false religion can give nothing to those who practise it that is not false, chimerical, and of short duration. It is for reason to judge whether the advantages procured are real or imaginary; and it belongs to reason to decide whether a religion, a worship a system of conduct, be advantageous or injurious to the human race.

It is according to these incontestible principles that I proceed to examine the Christian religion. I begin by analyzing the ideas which it gives us of the Deity, whom it boasts to make known to us in a more perfect manner than all the other religions in the world. I shall examine whether these ideas agree one with another; whether the dogmas taught by this religion are in reality conformable to these fundamental

rules, and can be reconciled with them; and whether the conduct it prescribes answers to the conceptions it gives us of the Deity. I shall then close the subject with an examination of the advantages which the Christian religion procures to mankind; advantages which, in the opinion of its partizans, infinitely surpass those which result from all the other religions of the earth.

Christianity admits for its basis, the belief of one God, whom it defines to be a pure spirit, an eternal, independent, and immutable intelligence, who performs every thing, knows every thing, foresees every thing, and fills the universe with immensity. He created out of nothing, the world, and all it contains; he preserves and governs it according to the laws of his wisdom, his goodness, his justice, and the infinite perfections displayed in all his works.

These are the ideas which Christianity gives us of the Deity. Let us see, then, if they agree with the other notions which this religious system presents to us, under the pretence that they were revealed by God himself, and that from him alone we hold those truths which he has hidden from the rest of mankind, to whom his perfections have never been made known. Thus the Christian religion is founded on a particular revelation. ; To whom was this revelation made? First to Abraham, and then to his posterity. The God of the universe, the Father of all mankind, resolved to make himself known only to the descendants of a Chaldean, who during the space of some thousands of

years, were in exclusive possession of the knowledge of the true God. By an act of his special goodness, the Jews were a long time the 'only people who were favoured with that knowledge' which is equally necessary to all mankind. This was the only people that knew how to conduct themselves towards the Supreme Being; all other nations were in darkness, or had ideas that were imperfect, ridiculous, and criminal respecting the Sovereign of Nature.

Thus, at the very first step, we perceive that Christianity annihilates the goodness and justice of its God. A particular revelation announces a partial God, who favours part of his children to the prejudice of all the rest; who consults only his own caprice, instead of rewarding real merit; who from his inability to give happiness to the whole human race, shows his tenderness only to a few individuals, who are nevertheless as much incapacitated to please him as the rest of their brethren. What shall we say of a father placed at the head of a numerous family, who should show his parental kindness only to one of his children; who should fix the whole of his attention on him alone, and who should be dissatisfied with all the rest for not performing his will, although he had never consented to let them approach his person. ; Should we not accuse such a father of caprice, cruelty, stupidity and folly, were he to inflict his wrath on those children, whom he himself had excluded from his presence? ; Should we not tax him with an injustice of which only the most senseless of our species could be capable, were

he to punish them for not obeying commands, which he had not condescended to make known to them?

Let us conclude then, Madam, that a particular revelation does not suppose God to be good, impartial, and equitable, but that it rather supposes an unjust and a whimsical tyrant, who, though he may display a kindness and a preference for some of his creatures, is for that very reason cruel to all the rest. This being the case, revelation does not prove the goodness, but it proves the caprice and partiality of the God whom the Christian religion teaches us to regard as a being of infinite wisdom, benevolence and equity, and as the common Father of all the inhabitants of the earth. If the interest and self-love of those whom he has favoured, cause them to admire the profound ways of a God, because he heaps benefits upon them to the injury of their fellow-creatures, he must appear very unjust to those who are the victims of his partiality.

Nothing but pride could persuade those men, that they were, to the exclusion of all others, the people cherished by providence.

Blinded by their vanity, they did not perceive that his universal and infinite goodness, was belied by supposing him capable of giving a preference to some particular men, or some particular nations, all of whom ought to be equal in his eyes, if it be true that they are equally the work of his hands.

Nevertheless, on particular revelations, are founded all the religions of the world. As each

man has the vanity to think himself the most important being in the universe, so is each nation persuaded that to the exclusion of all others, it ought to enjoy the tenderness of the Sovereign of Nature. If the Indians imagine that it is to them only that Brama has spoken; the Jews and Christians persuade themselves that for them alone, the world was created, and that it is to them alone that God has revealed himself.

But let us for a moment suppose that God has really manifested himself; how could a pure Spirit render himself sensible? What shape did he take? What kind of material organs did he make use of in speaking? How did the infinite Being communicate his thoughts to finite beings? I shall be answered that to accommodate himself to the weakness of his creatures, he employed in his ministry a chosen number of men to announce his will to others; that he has filled them with his own spirit, and spoken by their mouths.

But how shall we conceive the infinite Being capable of uniting himself with the finite nature of man? How shall I ascertain whether he who pretends to be inspired by the Deity, does not publish his own reveries or impositions for the oracles of heaven? How shall I ascertain if it be really true that God speaks by his voice? It is immediately replied that to give weight to the words of those whom he has chosen to be his interpreters, God has communicated to them a portion of his omnipotence, and that they have performed miracles which prove their divine mission. On my asking, what is a mira-

cle? I am told that it is an operation contrary to the laws of nature which God himself has fixed; to which I reply, that, according to the ideas I have formed of the divine wisdom, it appears to me impossible that an immutable God can change the wise laws which he himself has established. I thence conclude that miracles are impossible, seeing they are incompatible with our ideas of the wisdom and immutability of the Creator of the universe. ; Besides, these miracles would be useless to God! If he be omnipotent, ; can he not modify the minds of his creatures according to his own will?

To convince and to persuade them, he has only to will that they shall be convinced and persuaded. He has only to tell them things that are clear and sensible, things that may be demonstrated; and to evidence of such a kind they will not fail to give their assent. To do this, he will have no need either of miracles or interpreters; truth alone is sufficient to win mankind.

Supposing, nevertheless, the utility and possibility of these miracles, how shall I ascertain whether the wonderful operation which I see performed by the interpreter of the Deity, be conformable or contrary to the laws of nature? ; Am I acquainted with all these laws? ; May not he who speaks to me in the name of the Lord, execute by natural means, though to me unknown, those works which appear altogether extraordinary? ; How shall I assure myself that he does not deceive me? ; Does not my

ignorance of the secrets and shifts of his art, expose me to be the dupe of an able impostor, who might make use of the name of God to inspire me with respect, and to screen his deception? Thus, his pretended miracles ought to make me suspect him, even though I were a witness of them; but how would the case stand, were these miracles said to have been performed some thousands of years before my existence? I shall be told that they were attested by a multitude of witnesses; but if I cannot trust to myself when a miracle is performing, how shall I have confidence in others, who may be either more ignorant, or more stupid than myself, or who perhaps thought themselves interested in supporting by their testimony, tales entirely destitute of reality?

If, on the contrary, I admit these miracles, what do they prove to me? Will they furnish me with a belief that God has made use of his omnipotence to convince me of things, which are in direct opposition to the ideas I have formed of his essence, his nature, and his divine perfections? If I be persuaded that God is immutable, a miracle will not force me to believe that he is subject to change. If I be convinced that God is just and good, a miracle will never be sufficient to persuade me that he is unjust and wicked. If I possess an idea of his wisdom, all the miracles in the world would not persuade me that God would act like a madman. Shall I be told, that he would consent to perform miracles that destroy his divinity, or that are

proper only to erase from the minds of men the ideas which they ought to entertain of his infinite perfections? This, however, is what would happen were God himself to perform, or to grant the power of performing miracles in favour of a particular revelation. He would, in that case, derange the course of nature, to teach the world that he is capricious, partial, unjust, and cruel; he would make use of his omnipotence purposely to convince us, that his goodness was insufficient for the welfare of his creatures; he would make a vain parade of his power, to hide his inability to convince mankind by a single act of his will. In short, he would interfere with the eternal and immutable laws of nature, to show us that he is subject to change, and to announce to mankind some important news, which they had hitherto been destitute of, notwithstanding all his goodness.

Thus under whatever point of view we regard revelation, by whatever miracles we may suppose it attested, it will always be in contradiction to the ideas we have of the Deity. They will show us that he acts in an unjust and an arbitrary manner, consulting only his own whims in the favours he bestows, and continually changing his conduct; that he was unable to communicate all at once to mankind, the knowledge necessary to their existence, and to give them that degree of perfection, of which their natures were susceptible. Hence, Madam, you may see, that the supposition of a revelation, can never be reconciled with the infinite goodness,

justice, omnipotence, and immutability of the Sovereign of the universe.

They will not fail to tell you, that the Creator of all things, the independent Monarch of Nature is the master of his favours; that he owes nothing to his creatures; that he can dispose of them as he pleases, without any injustice, and without their having any right of complaint; that man is incapable of sounding the profundity of his decrees, and that his justice is not the justice of men. But all these answers which divines have continually in their mouths, serve only to accelerate the destruction of those sublime ideas, which they have given us of the Deity. The result appears to be, that God conducts himself according to the maxims of a fantastic sovereign, who satisfied in having rewarded some of his favourites, thinks himself justified in neglecting the rest of his subjects, and to leave them groaning in the most deplorable misery.

You must acknowledge, Madam, it is not on such a model, that we can form a powerful, equitable and beneficent God, whose omnipotence ought to enable him to procure happiness to all his subjects, without fear of exhausting the treasures of his goodness.

.. If we are told that divine justice bears no resemblance to the justice of men, I reply that in this case, we are not authorized to say that God is *just*; seeing that by justice, it is not possible for us to conceive any thing, except a similar quality to that called justice by the beings of our own species. If divine justice

bears no resemblance to human justice ; if, on the contrary, 'this justice resembles what we call injustice, then all our ideas confound themselves, and we know not either what we mean or what we say,' when we affirm that God is just. According to human ideas (which are however the only ones that men are possessed of) justice will always exclude caprice and partiality ; and never can we prevent ourselves from regarding as iniquitous and vicious, a sovereign, who being both able and willing to occupy himself with the happiness of his subjects, should plunge the greatest number of them into misfortune, and reserve his kindness for those to whom his whims have given the preference.

With respect to telling us, that *God owes nothing to his creatures*, such an atrocious principle is destructive of every idea of justice and goodness, and tends visibly to sap the foundation of all religion. A God that is just and good, owes happiness to every being to whom he has given existence ; he ceases to be just and good, if he produce them only to render them miserable ; and he would be destitute of both wisdom and reason, were he to give them birth only to be the victims of his caprice. What should we think of a father bringing children into the world, for the sole purpose of putting their eyes out, and tormenting them at his ease ?

On the other hand, every religion is founded on the reciprocal engagements supposed to exist between God and his creatures. If God owe nothing to men ; if he be not bound to fulfil

his engagements with them, when they fulfil their's, ; what purpose is religion intended to serve?

¿ What motives can men have to render to the Deity their homage and their worship?

¿ Why should we show so much officiousness in loving or serving a master, who thinks himself justified in dispensing with all duty towards those he has engaged in his service?

It is easy to perceive that the ideas which they promulgate, are destructive of divine justice, and that they are founded on a fatal prejudice, (common among the vulgar, that great power must necessarily place its possessor beyond the laws of equity, that force can give a right to act wickedly, and that no one ought to question the actions of a man sufficiently powerful to follow his own caprices. These notions are visibly borrowed from the conduct of tyrants, who no sooner possess unlimited power, than they cast off all restraint but that of their own fancy, and imagine that justice has nothing to do with their condition. — It is in this hideous shape, that our divines have formed their God, whose justice nevertheless they pretend to substantiate; yet, if the conduct attributed to him were true, we should be compelled to regard him as the most unjust of tyrants, the partial of fathers and the most fantastical of princes. In short, of all the beings that our minds can conceive, he would certainly be the most fearful and the least worthy of our love. We are likewise told that God, who created all men, wished himself to be known

only to a very small number among them: that whilst these chosen few exclusively enjoyed his kindness, all the rest are the objects of his wrath, and that he created them only with a view of leaving them in ignorance and darkness, in order to inflict on them the most cruel of punishments. We see that these unhappy traits in the character of the Deity, pierce through every shade of the Christian economy; we find them in the books which they pretend to be inspired, and witness them in the dogmas of predestination and grace.

In a word, this religion announces a despotic Deity whom we vainly attempt to justify, whilst every thing related of him serves only to prove his injustice, his capricious tyranny, and whimsical partiality. When we expostulate against his conduct, which, in the eyes of every rational man must appear so inordinate, the priests think to stop our mouths by telling us he is omnipotent; that he is the master of his own favours; that he owes nothing to any creature, and that we worms of the earth, have no right to criticise his actions. They finish by intimidating us with the frightful and iniquitous chastisements which are in reserve for those who dare to murmur at his decrees.

It is easy to perceive the futility of these arguments. Power, I do contend can never confer the right of violating equity. Let a sovereign be as powerful as he may, he is not on that account less blameable, when in rewards and punishments he follows only his caprice.

It is true, we may fear him, we may flatter him, we may pay him servile homage: but never shall we love him sincerely; never shall we serve him faithfully; never shall we look up to him as the model of justice and goodness. If those who receive his kindness believe him to be just and good, those who are the objects of his folly and vigour, cannot prevent themselves from detesting his monstrous iniquity in their hearts.

If we be told that we are only as worms of earth relatively to God, or that we are only like a vase in the hands of a potter, I reply in this case, that there can neither be connection nor moral duty between the creature and his Creator; and I shall hence conclude, that religion is useless, seeing that a worm of earth can owe nothing to a man crushes it, and that the vase can owe nothing to the potter that has formed it. In the supposition, that man is only a worm, or an earthen vessel in the eyes of the Deity, he would be incapable either of serving him, glorifying him, honouring him, or offending him. We are, however, continually told, that man is capable of merit and demerit in the sight of his God, whom he is ordered to love, serve and worship. We are likewise assured, that it was man alone, whom the Deity had in view in all his works; that it is for him alone, the universe was created; for him alone, that the course of nature was so often deranged; and, in short, it was with a view of being honoured, cherished, and glorified by man, that

God has revealed himself to us. According to the principles of the Christian religion, God does not cease, for a single instant, his occupations for man, this *worm of earth*, this *earthen vessel*, which he has formed. Nay, more : man is sufficiently powerful to influence the honour and glory of his God ; it rests neither with man to please him, or to irritate him, to deserve his favour or his hatred, to appease him or to kindle his wrath.

Do you not perceive, Madam, the striking contradictions of those principles which, nevertheless, form the basis of all revealed religions ? Indeed, we cannot find one of them that is not erected on the reciprocal influence between God and man, and between man and God. Our own species, which are annihilated (if I may use the expression) every time that it becomes necessary to whitewash the Deity from some reproachful stain of injustice and partiality ; these miserable beings ; to whom it is pretended that God owes nothing, and who, we are assured, are unnecessary to him for his own felicity ; the human race, which is nothing in his eyes, becomes all at once the principal performer on the stage of nature. We find that mankind are necessary to support the glory of their Creator ; we see them become the sole objects of his care ; we behold in them the power to gladden or afflict him ; we see them meriting his favour, and provoking his wrath. According to these contradictory notions concerning the God of the universe, the source of all felicity, is he not

really the most wretched of beings? We behold him perpetually exposed to the insults of men, who offend him by their thoughts, their words, their actions, and their neglect of duty. They incommode him, they irritate him, by the capriciousness of their minds, by their actions, their desires, and even by their ignorance. If we admit those Christian principles which suppose that the great portion of the human race excites the fury of the Eternal, and that very few of them live in a manner conformable to his views, will it not necessarily result therefrom, that in the immense crowd of beings whom God has created for his glory, only a very small number of them glorify him and please him; while all the rest are occupied in vexing him, exciting his wrath, troubling his felicity, deranging the order that he loves, frustrating his designs, and forcing him to change his immutable intentions?

You are, undoubtedly, surprized at the contradictions to be encountered at the very first step we take in examining this religion; and I take upon myself to predict that your embarrassment will increase as you proceed therein. If you coolly examine the ideas presented to us in the revelation common both to Jews and Christians, and contained in the books which they tell us are *sacred*, you will find that the Deity who speaks is always in contradiction with himself; that he becomes his own destroyer, and is perpetually occupied in undoing what he has just done, and in repairing his own workmanship, to which, in the first instance, he was incapable of giving

that degree of perfection he wished it to possess. He is never satisfied with his own works, and cannot, in spite of his omnipotence, bring the human race to the point of perfection he intended. The books containing the revelation, on which Christianity is founded, every where display to us a God of goodness in the commission of wickedness; an omnipotent God, whose projects unceasingly miscarry; an immutable God changing his maxims and his conduct; an omniscient God, continually deceived unawares; a resolute God, yet repenting of his most important actions; a God of wisdom, whose arrangements never attain success. — He is a great God, who occupies himself with the most puerile trifles; an all-sufficient God, yet subject to jealousy; a powerful God, yet suspicious, vindictive, and cruel; and a just God, yet permitting and prescribing the most atrocious iniquities. In a word, he is a perfect God, yet displaying at the same time such imperfections and vices, that the most despicable of men would blush to resemble him.

Behold, Madam, the God whom this religion orders you to adore *in spirit and in truth*. I reserve for another letter, an analysis of the holy books which you are taught to respect as the oracles of heaven. I now perceive for the first time, that I have perhaps made too long a dissertation, and I doubt not, you have already perceived, that a system built on a basis possessing so little solidity as that of the God whom his devotees raise with one hand and destroy with the other, can have no stability attached

to it, and can be regarded only as a long tissue of errors and contradictions.

I am, &c.

LETTER III.

YOU have seen, Madam, in my preceding letter, the incompatible and contradictory ideas which this religion gives us of the Deity. You will have seen that the revelation which is announced to us, instead of being the offspring of his goodness and tenderness for the human race, is really only a proof of injustice and partiality, of which a God who is equally just and good, would be entirely incapable. Let us now examine, whether the ideas suggested to us by these books, containing the divine oracles, are more rational, more consistent, or more conformable to the divine perfections. - Let us see whether the statements related in the Bible, whether the commands prescribed to us in the name of God himself, are really worthy of God, and display to us the characters of infinite wisdom, goodness, power and justice.

These inspired books go back to the origin of the world. Moses, the confidant, the interpreter, the historian of the Deity, makes us, (if we may use such an expression) witnesses of the formation of the universe. He tells us, that the Eternal, tired of his inaction, took it into his head to create a world that was necessary to his glory.

To effect this, he forms matter out of nothing; a pure spirit produces a substance which has no affinity to himself; although this God fills all space with his immensity, yet still he found room enough in it to admit the universe, as well as all the material bodies contained therein.

These at least are the ideas which divines wish us to form, respecting the creation, if such a thing were possible, as that of possessing a clear idea of a pure spirit producing matter. But this discussion is throwing us into metaphysical researches which I wish to avoid. It will be sufficient to you that you may console yourself for not being able to comprehend it, seeing that the most profound thinkers who talk about the creation, or the eduction of the world from nothing, have no ideas on the subject more precise than those which you form to yourself. As soon, Madam, as you take the trouble to reflect thereon, you will find that divines, instead of explaining things, have done nothing but invent words in order to render them dubious, and to confound all our natural conceptions.

I will not, however, tire you by a fastidious display of the blunders which fill the narrative of Moses, which they announce to us as being dictated by the Deity. If we read it with a little attention, we shall perceive in every page, philosophical and astronomical errors, unpardonable in an inspired author, and such as we should consider ridiculous in any man, who, in the most superficial manner, should have studied and contemplated nature.

- You will find for example, light created before the sun, although this star is visibly the source of light which communicates itself to our globe. - You will find the evening and the morning established before the formation of this same sun, whose presence alone produces day, whose absence produces night, and whose different aspects constitute morning and evening. You will there find that the moon is spoken of, as a body possessing its own light, in a similar manner as the sun possesses it, although this planet is a dark body and receives its light from the sun. These ignorant blunders are sufficient to show you, that the Deity who revealed himself to Moses, was quite unacquainted with the nature of those substances which he had created out of nothing, and that you at present possess more information respecting them, than was once possessed by the Creator of the world.

I am not ignorant that our divines have an answer always ready to those difficulties which would attack their divine science, and place their knowledge far below that of Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and even below that of young people, who have scarcely studied the first elements of natural philosophy. They will tell us that God in order to render himself intelligible to the savage and ignorant Jews, spoke in conformity to their imperfect notions, in the false and incorrect language of the vulgar. We must not be imposed upon by this solution, which our doctors regard as triumphant, and which they so frequently employ when it becomes necessary to

justify the Bible against the ignorance and vulgarities contained therein. We answer them, that a God who knows every thing, and can perform every thing, might by a single word, have rectified the false notions of the people he wished to enlighten, and enabled them to know the nature of bodies more perfectly than the most able men who have since appeared.— If it be replied that revelation is not intended to render men learned, but to make them pious, I answer that revelation was not sent to establish false notions, that it would be unworthy of God to borrow the language of falsehood and ignorance; that the knowledge of nature, so far from being an injury to piety, is by the avowal of divines, the most proper study to display the greatness of God. They tell us, that religion would be unmoveable, were it conformable to true knowledge, that we should have no objections to make to the recital of Moses, nor to the philosophy of the Holy Scriptures, if we found nothing but what was continually confirmed by experience, astronomy, and the demonstrations of geometry.

To maintain a contrary opinion, and to say that God is pleased in confounding the knowledge of men and in rendering it useless, is to pretend that he is pleased with making us ignorant and changeable, and that he condemns the progress of the human mind, although we ought to suppose him the author of it. To pretend that God was obliged in the scriptures to conform himself to the language of men, is to pre-

tend that he withdrew his assistance from those he wished to enlighten, and that he was unable of rendering them susceptible of comprehending the language of truth. This is an observation not to be lost sight of in the examination of revelation, where we find in each page that God expresses himself in a manner quite unworthy of the Deity. —; Could not an omnipotent God, instead of degrading himself, instead of condescending to speak the language of ignorance, so far enlighten them as to make them understand a language more true, more noble, and more conformable to the ideas which are given us of the Deity? An experienced master, by degrees enables his scholars to understand what he wishes to teach them, and a God ought to be able to communicate to them immediately, all the knowledge he intended to give them.

However, according to Genesis, God, after creating the world produced man from the dust of the earth. In the mean while we are assured that he created him *in his own image*; but what was the image of God? ; How could man, who is at least partly material, represent a pure spirit which excludes all matter?

; How could his imperfect mind be formed on the model of a mind possessing all perfection, like that which we suppose in the Creator of the universe? ; What resemblance, what proportion, what affinity could there be between a finite mind united to a body, and the infinite spirit of the Creator? These, doubtless, are great difficulties; hitherto it has been thought

impossible to decide them; and they will probably, for a long time employ the minds of those who strive to understand the incomprehensible meaning of a book, which God provided for our instruction.

; But why did God create man? Because he wished to people the universe with intelligent beings who would render him homage, who should witness his wonders, who should glorify him, who should meditate and contemplate his works, and merit his favours by their submission to his laws.

Here we behold man becoming necessary to the dignity of his God, who without him would live without being glorified, who would receive no homage, and who would be the melancholy Sovereign of an empire without subjects, a condition not suited to his vanity. I think it useless to remark to you what little conformity we find between those ideas, and such as are given us of a self-sufficient being, who, without the assistance of any other, is supremely happy. All the characters in which the Bible portrays the Deity, are always borrowed from man, or from a proud monarch, and we every where find, that instead of having made man after his own image, it is man that has always made God after the image of himself, that has conferred on him his own way of thinking, his own virtues and his own vices.

; But did this man whom the Deity has created for his glory, faithfully fulfil the wishes of his Creator? This subject that he has just

acquired, will he be obedient, ; will he render homage to his power, will he execute his will? He has done nothing of the kind. Scarcely is he created when he becomes rebellious to the orders of his sovereign; he eats a forbidden fruit which God has placed in his way in order to tempt him, and by this act, draws the divine wrath, not only on himself, but on all his posterity. Thus it is, that he annihilates at one blow the great projects of the omnipotent, who had no sooner made man for his glory than he becomes offended with that conduct which he ought to have foreseen.

; Here he finds himself obliged to change his projects with regard to mankind, he becomes their enemy, and condemns them and the whole of the race (who had not yet the power of sinning) to innumerable penalties, to cruel calamities, and to death! ; What do I say? To punishments which death itself shall not terminate. Thus God, who wished to be glorified, is not glorified; he seems to have created man only to offend him, that he might afterwards punish the offender.

In this recital, which is founded on the Bible, ; can you recognize, Madam, an omnipotent God, whose orders are always accomplished, and whose projects are all necessarily executed? In a God who tempts us, or who permits us to be tempted, ; do you behold a being of beneficence and sincerity? ; In a God who punishes the being he has tempted or subjected to temptation, do you perceive any equity? In a God

who extends his vengeance even to those who have not sinned, do you behold any shadow of justice? - In a God who is irritated at what he knew must necessarily happen, can you imagine any foresight? In the rigorous punishments by which this God is destined to avenge himself of his feeble creatures, both in this world and the next, can you perceive the least appearance of goodness?

It is however this history, or rather this fable, on which is founded the whole edifice of the Christian religion.

If the first man had not been disobedient, the human race had not been the object of the divine wrath, and would have had no need of a redeemer. If this God who knows all things, foresees all things, and possesses all power, had prevented or foreseen the fault of Adam, it would not have been necessary for God to sacrifice his own innocent son to appease his fury. Mankind, for whom he created the universe, would then have been always happy; they would not have incurred the displeasure of that Deity who demanded their adoration. In a word, if this apple had not been imprudently eaten by Adam and his spouse, mankind would not have suffered so much misery, man would have enjoyed without interruption, the immortal happiness to which God had destined him, and the views of Providence towards his creatures would not have been frustrated.

It would be useless to make reflections on notions so whimsical, so contrary to the wisdom, the power, and the justice of the Deity. It is

doing quite enough to compare the different objects which the Bible presents to us to perceive their inutility, absurdities, and contradictions. We there see, continually, a wise God conducting himself like a madman. He defeats his own projects that he may afterwards repair them; repents of what he has done; acts as if he had foreseen nothing, and is forced to permit proceedings which his omnipotence could not prevent. — In the writings revealed by this God, he appears occupied only in blackening his own character, degrading himself, vilifying himself, even in the eyes of men whom he would excite to worship him and pay him homage; overturning and confounding the minds of those whom he had designed to enlighten. What has just been said, might suffice to undeceive us with respect to a book which would pass better as being intended to destroy the idea of a Deity, than as one containing the oracles dictated and revealed by him. Nothing but a heap of absurdities could possibly result from principles so false and irrational; nevertheless, let us take another glance at the principal objects which this divine work continually offers to our consideration. Let us pass on to the deluge. The holy books tell us, that in spite of the will of the Almighty, the whole human race, who had already been punished by infirmities, accidents and death, continued to give themselves up to the most unaccountable depravity. God becomes irritated and repents having created them. Doubtless he could not have foreseen this depravity, yet, rather than change the wick-

ed disposition of their hearts, which he holds in his own hands, he performs the most surprising, the most impossible of miracles. He at once drowns all the inhabitants, with the exception of some favourites, whom he destines to re-people the earth with a chosen race, that will render themselves more agreeable to their God. ; But does the Almighty succeed in this new project ? The chosen race, saved from the waters of the deluge, on the wreck of the earth's destruction, begin again to offend the Sovereign of Nature, abandon themselves to new crimes, give themselves up to idolatry, and forgetting the recent effects of celestial véngence, seem intent only on provoking heaven by their wickedness. In order to provide a remedy, God chooses for his favourite the idolater Abraham. To him he discovers himself; he orders him to renounce the worship of his fathers, and embrace a new religion. To guarantee this covenant, the Sovereign of nature prescribes a melancholy, ridiculous and whimsical ceremony, to the observance of which a God of wisdom attaches his favours. The posterity of this chosen man are consequently to enjoy for everlasting, the greatest advantages; they will always be the most partial object of tenderness with the Almighty; they will be happier than all other nations whom the Deity will abandon to occupy himself only for them.

These solemn promises, however, have not prevented the race of Abraham from becoming the slaves of a vile nation, that was detested by the Eternal; his dear friends experienced the

most cruel treatment on the part of the Egyptians. God could not guarantee them from the misfortune that had befallen them; but in order to free them again, he raised up to them a liberator, a chief, who performed the most astonishing miracles. At the voice of Moses, all nature is confounded; God employs him to declare his will, yet he who could create and annihilate the world, could not subdue Pharaoh. - The obstinacy of this Prince defeats in ten successive trials, the divine omnipotence of which Moses is the depository. After having vainly attempted to overcome a monarch, whose heart God had been pleased to harden, God has recourse to the most ordinary method of rescuing his people; he tells them to run off, after having first counselled them to rob the Egyptians. The fugitives are pursued, but God, who protects these robbers, orders the sea to swallow up the miserable people, who had the temerity to run after their property.

The Deity would, doubtless, have reason to be satisfied with the conduct of a people that he had just delivered by such a great number of miracles. ; Alas! Neither Moses nor the Almighty, could succeed in persuading this obstinate people to abandon the false gods of that country where they had been so miserable; they preferred them to the living God who had just saved them. - All the miracles which the Eternal was daily performing in favour of Israel, could not overcome their stubbornness, which was still more inconceivable and wonderful than the greatest miracles. + These wonders which

are now extolled as convincing proofs of the divine mission of Moses, were by the confession of this same Moses, who has himself transmitted us the accounts, incapable of convincing the people who were witnesses of them, and never produced the good effects which the Deity proposed to himself in performing them.

The credulity, the obstinacy, the continual depravity of the Jews, Madam, are the most indubitable proofs of the falsity of the miracles of Moses, as well as those of all his successors, to whom the Scriptures attribute a supernatural power. If in the face of these facts it be pretended that these miracles are attested, we shall be compelled, at least, to agree that, according to the Bible account, they have been entirely useless, that the Deity has been constantly baffled in all his projects, and that he could never make of the Hebrews a people submissive to his will.

We find, however, God continues obstinately employed to render his people worthy of him; he does not lose sight of them for a moment; he sacrifices whole nations to them, and sanctions their rapine, violence, treason, murder, and usurpation. In a word, he permits them to do any thing to obtain his ends. He is continually sending them chiefs, prophets, and wonderful men, who try in vain to bring them to their duty. The whole history of the Old Testament displays nothing but the vain efforts of God to vanquish the obstinacy of his people. To succeed in this, he employs kindnesses, miracles, and severity. Sometimes he delivers up to them

whole nations to be hated, pillaged, and exterminated; at other times he permits these same nations to exercise over his favourite people the greatest of cruelties. He delivers them into the hand of their enemies, who are likewise the enemies of God himself. Idolatrous nations become masters of the Jews, who are left to feel the insults, the contempt, and the most unheard-of severities, and are sometimes compelled to sacrifice to idols, and to violate the law of their God. The race of Abraham becomes the prey of impious nations. The Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, make them successively undergo the most cruel treatment, and suffer the most bloody outrages, and God even permits his temple to be polluted in order to punish the Jews.

To terminate, at length, the troubles of his cherished people, the pure Spirit that created the universe, sends his own son. It is said that he had already been announced by his prophets, though this was certainly done in a manner admirably adapted to prevent his being known on his arrival. This Son of God becomes a man through his kindness for the Jews, whom he came to liberate, to enlighten, and to render the most happy of mortals. Being clothed with divine omnipotence, he performs the most astonishing miracles, which do not, however, convince the Jews. He can do every thing but convert them. Instead of converting and liberating the Jews, he is himself compelled, notwithstanding all his miracles, to undergo the most infamous of punishments, and to terminate his life like a

common malefactor. 'God is condemned to death by the people he came to save. The Eternal hardened and blinded those among whom he sent his own Son; he did not foresee that this Son would be rejected. ; What do I say? He managed matters in such a way as not to be recognized, and took such steps that his favourite people derived no benefit from the coming of the Messiah. In a word, the Deity seems to have taken the greatest care that his projects, so favourable to the Jews, should be nullified and rendered unprofitable.

When we expostulate against a conduct so strange and so unworthy of the Deity, we are told it was necessary for every thing to take place in such a manner, for the accomplishment of prophecies, which had announced that the Messiah should be disowned, rejected, and put to death. ; But why did God, who knows all, and who foresaw the fate of his dear Son, form the project of sending him among the Jews, to whom he must have known that his mission would be useless? ; Would it not have been easier neither to announce him nor send him? ; Would it not have been more conformable to divine omnipotence, to spare himself the trouble of so many miracles, so many prophecies, so much useless labour, so much wrath, and so many sufferings to his own Son, by giving at once to the human race that degree of perfection he intended for them?

We are told it was necessary that the Deity should have a victim; that to repair the fault of the first man, no expedient would be sufficient

but the death of another God ; that the only God of the universe could not be appeased but by the blood of his own Son. I reply, in the first place, that God had only to prevent the first man from committing a fault ; that this would have spared him much chagrin and sorrow, and saved the life of his dear Son. I reply, likewise, that man is incapable of offending God unless God either permitted it, or consented to it. I shall not examine how it is possible for God to have a son, who being as much a God as himself, can be subject to death. I reply, also, that it is impossible to perceive such a grave fault and sin in taking an apple ; and that we can find very little proportion between the crime committed against the Deity by eating an apple, and his Son's death.

I know well enough, I shall be told that these are all mysteries ; but I in my turn shall reply, that mysteries are imposing words, imagined by men who know not how to get themselves out of the labyrinth, into which their false reasonings and senseless principles have once plunged them.

Be this as it may, we are assured that the Messiah or the Deliverer of the Jews, had been clearly predicted and described, by the prophecies contained in the Old Testament. In this case, ? I demand why the Jews have disowned this wonderful man, this God whom God sent to them ? They answer me, that the incredulity of the Jews was likewise predicted, and that divers inspired writers had announced the death of the Son of God. To which I reply, that a

sensible God ought not to have sent him under such circumstances, that an omnipotent God ought to have adopted measures more efficacious and certain, to bring his people into the way in which he wished them to go. If he wished not to convert, and liberate the Jews, it was quite useless to send his Son among them, and thereby expose him to a death that was both certain and foreseen.

They will not fail to tell me, that in the end, the Divine patience became tired of the excesses of the Jews; that the immutable God, who had sworn an eternal alliance with the race of Abraham, wished at length to break the treaty, which he had, however, assured them should last forever. It is pretended that God had determined to reject the Hebrew nation, in order to adopt the Gentiles, whom he had hated and despised nearly four thousand years. I reply, that this discourse is very little conformable to the ideas we ought to have of a God who *changes not*, whose mercy is *infinite*, and whose goodness is *inexhaustible*. I shall tell them, that in this case, the Messiah announced by the Jewish prophets was destined for the Jews, and that he ought to have been their liberator, instead of destroying their worship, and their religion. If it be possible to unravel any thing in these obscure, enigmatical, and symbolical oracles of the prophets of Judea, as we find them in the Bible; if there be any means of guessing the meaning of the 'obscure riddles,' which have been decorated with the pompous name of prophecies, we shall perceive that the inspired writers, when they are in a good humour,

always promise the Jews, a man that will redress their grievances, restore the kingdom of Judah, and not one that should destroy the religion of Moses. If it were for the Gentiles that the Messiah should come, he is no longer the Messiah promised to the Jews, and announced by their prophets. If Jesus be the Messiah of the Jews, he could not be the destroyer of their nation.

Should I be told, that Jesus himself declared that he came to fulfil the law of Moses, and not to abolish it, I ask, why Christians do not observe the law of the Jews?

Thus, in whatever light we regard Jesus Christ, we perceive that he could not be the man whom the prophets have predicted, since it is evident that he came only to destroy the religion of the Jews, which though instituted by God himself, had nevertheless become disagreeable to him. If this inconstant God, who was wearied with the worship of the Jews, had at length repented of his injustice towards the Gentiles, it was to them that he ought to have sent his Son. By acting in this way, he would at least, have saved his old friends from a frightful *deicide* which he forced them to commit, because they were not able to recognize the God he sent amongst them. Besides, the Jews were very pardonable in not acknowledging their expected Messiah, in an artisan of Galilee, who was destitute of all the characteristics which the prophets had related, and during whose lifetime his fellow-citizens were neither liberated nor happy.

We are told that he performed miracles. He healed the sick ; caused the lame to walk ; gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. At length he accomplished his own resurrection. It might be so believed ; yet, he has visibly failed in that miracle, for which alone he came upon earth. He was never able either to persuade or to convert the Jews, who witnessed all the daily wonders that he performed. Notwithstanding those prodigies, they placed him ignominiously on the cross. In spite of his divine power, he was incapable of escaping punishment. He wished to die, to render the Jews culpable, and to have the pleasure of rising again the third day, in order to confound the ingratitude and obstinacy of his fellow-citizens. ; What is the result ? ; Did his fellow-citizens concede to this great miracle, and have they at length acknowledged him ? Far from it ; they never saw him. The Son of God, who rose from the dead in secrecy, showed himself only to his adherents. They alone pretend to have conversed with him. They alone have furnished us with the particulars of his life and miracles, and yet by such suspicious testimony, they wish to convince us of the divinity of his mission, eighteen hundred years after the event, although he could not convince his contemporaries the Jews.

We are then told, that many Jews have been converted to Jesus Christ ; that after his death many others were converted ; that the witnesses of the life and miracles of the Son of God, have sealed their testimony with their blood ; that men will not die to attest falsehood ; that by a

visible effect of the divine power, the people of a great part of the earth have adopted Christianity, and still persist in the belief of this divine religion.

In all this I perceive nothing like a miracle. I see nothing but what is conformable to the ordinary progress of the human mind. An enthusiast, a dexterous impostor, a crafty juggler, can easily find adherents in a stupid, ignorant, and superstitious populace. These followers, captivated by counsels, or seduced by promises, consent to quit a painful and laborious life, to follow a man who gives them to understand that he will make them *fishers of men*; that is to say, he will enable them to subsist by his cunning tricks, at the expense of the multitude who are always credulous. The juggler, with the assistance of his remedies, can perform cures which seem miraculous to ignorant spectators. These simple creatures immediately regard him as a supernatural being. He adopts this opinion himself, and confirms the high notions which his partisans have formed respecting him. He feels himself interested in maintaining this opinion among his sectaries, and finds out the secret of exciting their enthusiasm. To accomplish this point, our Empirick becomes a preacher; he makes use of riddles, obscure sentences, and parables to the multitude, that always admire what they do not understand. To render himself more agreeable to the people, he declaims among poor, ignorant, foolish men, against the rich, the great, the learned; but above all, against the *priests*, who in all ages, have been *avaricious*,

imperious, uncharitable, and burthensome to the people. If these discourses be eagerly received among the vulgar, who are always morose, envious, and jealous, they displease all those who see themselves the objects of the invective and satire of the popular preacher.

They consequently wish to check his progress, they lay snares for him, they seek to surprise him in a fault, in order that they may unmask him and have their revenge. By dint of imposture he outwits them; yet, in consequence of his miracles and illusions, he at length discovers himself. — He is then seized and punished, and none of his adherents abide by him, except a few idiots that nothing can undeceive; none but partisans accustomed to lead with him a life of idleness; none but dexterous knaves who wish to continue their impositions on the public, by deceptions similar to those of their old master, by obscure, unconnected, confused, and fanatical harangues, and by declamations against *magistrates* and *priests*. These who have the power in their own hands, finish by persecuting them, imprisoning them, flogging them, chastising them, and putting them to death. Poor wretches habituated to poverty, undergo all these sufferings with a fortitude which we frequently meet with in malefactors. In some we find their courage fortified by the zeal of fanaticism. This fortitude surprises, agitates, excites pity, and irritates the spectators against those who torment men, whose constancy makes them looked upon as being innocent, who it is supposed, may possibly be right, and for whom com-

passion likewise interests itself. It is thus, that enthusiasm is propagated, and that persecution always augments the number of the partisans of those who are persecuted.

I shall leave to you, Madam, the trouble of applying the history of our juggler, and his adherents, to that of the founder, the apostles, and the martyrs of the Christian religion.

With whatever art they have written the life of Jesus Christ, which we hold only from his apostles, or their disciples, it furnishes a sufficiency of materials on which to found our conjectures. I shall only observe to you, that the Jewish nation was remarkable for its credulity; that the companions of Jesus were chosen from among the dregs of the people; that Jesus always gave a preference to the populace; with whom he wished, doubtlessly, to form a rampart against the *priests*; and that, at last, Jesus was seized immediately after the most splendid of his miracles. We see him put to death immediately after the resurrection of Lazarus, which, even according to the Gospel account, bears the most evident characters of fraud, which are visible to every one who examines it without prejudice.

I imagine, Madam, that what I have just stated will suffice to show you what opinion you ought to entertain respecting the founder of Christianity and his first sectaries. These have been either dupes or fanatics, who permitted themselves to be seduced by deceptions, and by discourses conformable to their desires, or by dexterous impostors, who knew how to make the best of

the tricks of their old master, to whom they have become such able successors. In this way did they establish a religion which enabled them to live at the people's expence, and which still maintains in abundance, those we pay at such a high rate, for transmitting from father to son the fables, visions, and wonders, which were born and nursed in Judea. The propagation of the Christian faith, and the constancy of their martyrs, have nothing surprizing in them. The people flock after all those that show them wonders, and receive without reasoning on it, every thing that is told them. They transmit to their children the tales they have heard related, and by degrees these opinions are adopted by kings, by the great, and even by the learned.

As for the martyrs, their constancy has nothing supernatural in it. The first Christians, as well as all new sectaries, were treated by the Jews and Pagans, as disturbers of the public peace. They were already sufficiently intoxicated with the fanaticism with which their religion inspired them; and were persuaded that God held himself in readiness to crown them, and to receive them into his eternal dwelling. In a word, seeing the heavens opened, and being convinced that the end of the world was approaching, it is not surprizing that they had courage to set punishment at defiance, to endure it with constancy, and to despise death. To these motives, founded on their religious opinions, many others were added, which are always of such a nature, as to operate strongly upon the minds of men. Those, who as Christians

were imprisoned, and ill-treated on account of their faith, were visited, consoled, encouraged, honoured, and loaded with kindnesses by their brethren, who took care of, and succoured them during their detention, and who almost adored them after their death. Those, on the other hand, who displayed weakness, were despised and detested, and when they gave way to repentance, they were compelled to undergo a rigorous penitence, which lasted as long as they lived. Thus were the most powerful motives united to inspire the martyrs with courage; and this courage has nothing more supernatural about it, than that which determines us daily to encounter the most perilous dangers, through the fear of dishonouring ourselves in the eyes of our fellow-citizens. Cowardice would expose us to infamy all the rest of our days. There is nothing miraculous in the constancy of a man, to whom an offer is made, on the one hand, of eternal happiness, and the highest honours; and who, on the other hand, sees himself menaced with hatred, contempt, and the most lasting regret.

You perceive then, Madam, that nothing can be easier, than to overthrow the proofs by which Christian doctors establish the revelation, which they pretend is so well authenticated. Miracles, martyrs, and prophecies, prove nothing.

Were all the wonders true, that are related in the Old and New Testament, they would afford no proof in favour of divine omnipotence, but, on the contrary, would prove the inability

under which the Deity has continually laboured, of convincing mankind of the truths he wished to announce to them. On the other hand, supposing these miracles to have produced all the effects which the Deity had a right to expect from them, we have no longer any reason to believe them, except on the tradition and recitals of others, which are often suspicious, faulty, and exaggerated. The miracles of Moses, are attested only by Moses, or by Jewish writers, interested in making them believed by the people they wished to govern. The miracles of Jesus are attested only by his disciples, who sought to obtain adherents, in relating to a credulous people, prodigies to which they pretended to have been witnesses, or which some of them perhaps, believed they had really seen. All those who deceive mankind are not always cheats, they are frequently deceived by those who are knaves in reality. Besides, I believe I have sufficiently proved, that miracles are repugnant to the essence of an immutable God, as well as to his wisdom, which will not permit him to alter the wise laws he has himself established. In short, miracles are useless, since those related in Scripture have not produced the effects which God expected from them.

The proof of the Christian religion taken from prophecy, has no better foundation. Whoever will examine without prejudice these oracles pretended to be divine, will find only an ambiguous, unintelligible, absurd, and unconnected jargon, entirely unworthy of a God who intended to display his prescience, and to instruct his

people with regard to future events. There does not exist in the Holy Scriptures a single prophecy sufficiently precise, to be literally applied to Jesus Christ. To convince yourself of this truth, ask the most learned of our doctors, which are the formal prophecies, wherein they have the happiness to discover the Messiah? - You will then perceive, that it is only by the aid of forced explanations, figures, parables, and mystical interpretations, by which they are enabled to bring forward any thing sensible and applicable to the *god-made-man* who they tell us to adore. It would seem as if the Deity had made predictions only that we might understand nothing about them.

In these equivocal oracles, whose meaning it is impossible to penetrate, we find nothing but the language of intoxication, fanaticism, and delirium. When we fancy we have found something intelligible, it is easy to perceive that the prophets intended to speak of events that took place in their own age, or of personages who had preceded them. It is thus, that our doctors apply gratuitously to Christ, prophecies, or rather narratives of what happened respecting David, Solomon, Cyrus, &c.

We imagine we see the chastisement of the Jewish people announced in recitals, where it is evident the only matter in question was the Babylonish captivity. In this event, so long prior to Jesus Christ, they have imagined finding a prediction of the dispersion of the Jews, supposed to be a visible punishment for their *deicide*, and which they now wish to pass off

as an indubitable proof of the truth of Christianity.

It is not then astonishing, that the ancient and modern Jews do not see in the prophets what our doctors teach us, and what they themselves imagine they have seen. Jesus himself has not been more happy in his predictions than his predecessors. — In the gospel he announces to his disciples in the most formal manner, the destruction of the world, and the last judgment, as events that were at hand, and which must take place before the existing generation had passed away. Yet, the world still endures, and appears in no danger of finishing. It is true, our doctors pretend, that in the prediction of Jesus Christ, he spoke of the ruin of Jerusalem by Vespasian and Titus; but none but those who have not read the gospel would submit to such a change, or satisfy themselves with such an evasion. Besides, in adopting it, we must confess at least, that the Son of God himself was unable to prophesy with greater precision than his obscure predecessors.

Indeed, at every page of these sacred books, which we are assured were inspired by God himself, this God seems to have made a revelation only to conceal himself. He does not speak but to be misunderstood. He announces his oracles in such a way only that we can neither comprehend them, nor make any application of them. He performs miracles only to make unbelievers. He manifests himself to mankind only to stupify their judgment, and bewilder the reason he had bestowed on them. The Bible

continually represents God to us, as a seducer, an enticer, a suspicious tyrant, who knows not what kind of conduct to observe with respect to his subjects; who amuses himself by laying snares for his creatures, and who tries them that he may have the pleasure of inflicting a punishment for yielding to his temptations. This God is occupied only in building to destroy, in demolishing to rebuild. Like a child disgusted with its play-things, he is continually undoing what he has done, and breaking what was the object of his desires. We find no foresight, no constancy, no consistency in his conduct; no connection, no clearness in his discourses. When he performs any thing, he sometimes approves what he has done, and at other times repents of it. He irritates and vexes himself with what he has permitted to be done, and in spite of his infinite power, he suffers man to offend him, and consents to let Satan, his creature, derange all his projects. In a word, the revelations of the Christians and Jews seem to have been imagined only to render uncertain, and to annihilate the qualities attributed to the Deity, and which are declared to constitute his essence. The whole Scripture, the entire system of the Christian religion, appears to be founded only on the incapability of God, who was unable to render the human race as wise, as good, and as happy, as he wished them. The death of his innocent Son, who was immolated to his vengeance, is entirely useless for the most numerous portion of the earth's inhabitants; almost the whole human race, in spite of the continual efforts of the Deity, continue to offend

him, to frustrate his designs, resist his will, and to persevere in their wickedness.

It is on notions so fatal, so contradictory, and so unworthy of a God who is just, wise, and good; of a God that is rational, independent, immutable, and omnipotent, on whom the Christian religion is founded, and which religion is said to be established for ever, by God, who nevertheless became disgusted with the religion of the Jews, with whom he had made and sworn an eternal covenant.

Time must prove whether God be more constant and faithful in fulfilling his engagements with the Christians, than he has been to fulfil those he made with Abraham and his posterity. I confess, Madam, that his past conduct, alarms me as to what he may finally perform. If he himself acknowledged by the mouth of Ezekiel, that the laws he had given to the Jews *were not good*; he may very possibly, some day or other, find fault with those which he has given to Christians.

Our priests, themselves, seem to partake of my suspicions, and to fear that God will be wearied of that protection, which he has so long granted to his church. The inquietudes which they evince, the efforts which they make to hinder the civilization of the world; the persecutions which they raise against all those who contradict them, seem to prove that they mistrust the promises of Jesus Christ, and that they are not certainly convinced of the eternal durability of a religion which does not appear to them divine, but, because it gives them the right

to command like gods, over their fellow-citizens. It would be, without doubt, exceedingly disagreeable to them, were their empire overthrown; however, it is only through fear, that both the sovereigns and people of the earth have endured their yoke so long: the sovereign of heaven is already sufficiently disgusted with them.

May I then dare to hope, Madam, that the reading of this letter will undeceive you effectually, respecting a blind veneration for books which they call divine, seeing they appear to have been written rather to degrade and lessen the character of the Deity, than to prove him their author. In my first letter, I trust you see that the dogmas established by those books, or invented long since to justify the ideas they give us of the Deity, are not less contradictory than our notions of that Being are infinitely perfect. A system which sets out with false principles, can never end but in a mass of falsehoods.

I am, &c.

LETTER IV.

You know, Madame, that our teachers pretend that those revealed books which I have summarily examined in my preceding letter, do not contain one word, which is not by the inspiration of the spirit of God. What I have said to you ought, therefore, on this supposition to prove, that the Divinity has made a work the most mis-shapen, the most contradictory, the

most unintelligible that has ever existed ; in a word, a work of which any man of sense would blush to be the author. If any prophecy hath verified itself for the Christians, it is that of Isaiah, which saith, "Hearing ye shall hear, but shall not understand." But in this case, we reply that it was sufficiently useless to speak not to be comprehended, to reveal *that* which cannot be comprehended, is to reveal *nothing*.

We need not, then, be surprised if the Christians, notwithstanding the revelation of which they assure us they have been the favourites, have no precise ideas either of the Divinity, or of His will, or the way in which His oracles are to be interpreted. The book from which they should be able to do so, serves only to confound the simplest notions, to throw them into the greatest incertitude, and create eternal disputations. If it was the project of the Divinity, it would without doubt, be attended with perfect success. The teachers of Christianity never agree on the manner in which they are to understand the truths, that God has given himself the trouble to reveal ; all the efforts which they have employed to this time, have not yet been capable of making any thing clear, and the dogmas which they have successively invented, have been insufficient to justify to the understanding of one man of good sense, the conduct of an infinitely perfect Being.

Hence, many among them perceiving the inconveniencies which would result from the reading of the holy books, have carefully kept them out of the hands of the vulgar and illiterate ; for

they plainly foresaw, that if they were read by such, they would necessarily bring on themselves reproach, since it would never fail that every honest man of good sense, would discover in those books only a crowd of absurdities. Thus, the oracles of God are not even made for those for whom they are addressed; it is requisite to be initiated in the mysteries of priesthood, to have the privilege of discerning in the holy writings, the light which the divinity destined to all his dear children. ; But, are the theologians themselves able to make plain the difficulties which the sacred books present in every page? By meditating on the mysteries which they contain; ; have they given us ideas more plain of the intentions of the divinity? No; without doubt, they explain one mystery by citing another; they scatter new obscurities on previous obscurities; rarely do they agree among themselves, and when by chance their opinions coincide, *we* are not more enlightened, nor is our judgment more convinced; on the other hand, our reason is the more confounded.

If they do agree on some point, it is only to tell us that human reason, of which God is the author, is depraved; ; but what is the purport of this coincidence in their opinions, if it be not to tax the Deity with imbecility, injustice, and malignity? ; For why should God, in creating a reasonable being, not have given him an understanding which nothing could corrupt? They reply to us, by saying: "that the reason of man is necessarily limited; that perfection could not be the portion of a *creature*; that the designs of

God are not like those of man." But, in this case, why should the Divinity be offended by the necessary imperfections which he discovers in his creatures? — How can a just God require that our mind must admit what it was not made to comprehend? — Can He, who is above our reason, be understood by us, whose reason is so limited? — If God be infinite, how can a finite creature reason respecting him? — If the mysteries and hidden designs of the Divinity are of such a nature as not to be comprehended by man, what good can we derive from their investigation? — Had God designed that we should occupy our thoughts with his purposes, would he not have given us an understanding proportionate to the things he wished us to penetrate? — You see then, Madam, that in depressing our reason, in supposing it corrupted, our priests, at the same time, annihilate even the necessity of religion, which cannot be either useful or important to us, if above our comprehension. — They do more, in supposing human reason depraved, they accuse God of injustice, in requiring that our reason should conceive what cannot be conceived. They accuse Him of imbecility in not rendering this reason more perfect. — In a word, in degrading man, they degrade God, and rob him of those attributes which compose his essence. — Would you call him a just and good parent, who, wishing that his children should walk by an obscure route filled with difficulties, would only give them for their conduct a light too weak to find their way, and to avoid the continual dangers by which they are surround-

ed? - Should you find that this father had foreseen their actual situation, but had given them written instructions, which were both unintelligible and inadequate for their guidance, would you not pronounce him weak and designing, or renounce any report that drew such a picture of a parent?

The priests do not, however, offend us when they say that the corruption of reason and the weakness of the human mind are the consequences of sin. But why has man become sinful? How has the good God permitted his dear children, for whom he created the universe, and of whom he exacts obedience, to offend him, and thereby extinguish, or, at least, weaken the light he had given them? On the other hand, the reason of Adam ought to be, without doubt, completely perfect before his fall. In this case, why did it not prevent that fall and its consequences? Was the reason of Adam corrupted even beforehand by incurring the wrath of his God? Was it depraved before he had done any thing to deprave it?

To justify this strange conduct of Providence; to clear him from passing as the author of sin; to save him the ridicule of being the cause, or the accomplice of offences which he did against himself, the theologians have imagined a *being* subordinate to the divine power. It is the secondary being they make the author of all the evil which is committed in the universe. In the impossibility of reconciling the continual disorders of which the world is the theatre, with the purposes of a Deity replete with goodness, the

creator and preserver of the universe, who delights in order, and who seeks only the happiness of his creatures, they have trumped up a destructive genius, imbued with wickedness, who conspires to render men miserable, and to overthrow the beneficent views of the Eternal. This bad and perverse being they call *Satan*, the *Devil*, the *Evil One*—and we see him play a great game in all the religions of the world, the founders of which have found in the impotence of Deity, the sources of both good and evil. By the aid of this imaginary being, they have been enabled to resolve all their difficulties; yet they could not foresee that this invention, which went to annihilate or abridge the power of Deity, was a system filled with palpable contradictions, and that if the Devil were really the author of sin, it would be he, in all justice, who ought to undergo all its punishment.

If God is the author of all, it is he who created the Devil; if the Devil is wicked, if he strives to counteract the projects of the Divinity, it is the Divinity who has allowed the overthrow of his projects, or who has not had sufficient authority to prevent the Devil from exercising his power. If God had wished that the Devil should not have existed, the Devil would not have existed. God could annihilate him at one word, or, at least, God could change his disposition if injurious to us, and contrary to the projects of a beneficent Providence. Since, then, the Devil does exist, and does such marvellous things as are attributed to him, we are compelled to con-

clude, that the Divinity has found it good that he should exist and agitate, as he does, all his works by a perpetual interruption and perversion of his designs,

Thus, Madam, the invention of the Devil does not remedy the evil; on the contrary, it but entangles the priests more and more. By placing to Satan's account all the evil which he commits in the world, they exculpate the Deity of nothing; all the power with which they have supposed the Devil invested, is taken from that assigned to the Divinity; and you know very well, that according to the notions of the Christian religion, the Devil has more adherents than God himself; they are always stirring their fellow-creatures up to revolt against God; without ceasing, in despite of God, Satan leads them into perdition, except one man only, who refused to follow him, and who found grace in the eyes of the Lord. You are not ignorant, that the millions that follow the standard of Beelzebub are to be plunged with him into eternal misery.

But then ; has Satan himself incurred the disgrace of the all-powerful? ; By what forfeit has he merited becoming the eternal object of the anger of that God who created him? The Christian religion will explain all. It informs us, that the Devil was in his origin an angel; that is to say, a pure spirit full of perfections, created by the Divinity to occupy a distinguishing situation in the celestial court, destined like the other ministers of the Eternal, to receive his orders, and to enjoy perpetual blessedness. But he lost himself through ambition; his pride blinded him,

and he dared to revolt against his creator; he engaged other spirits, as pure as himself, in the same senseless enterprize; in consequence of his rashness he was hurled headlong out of heaven, his miserable adherents were involved in his fall, and having been hardened by the Divine pleasure in their foolish dispositions, they have no other occupation assigned them in the universe than to tempt mankind, and endeavour to augment the number of the enemies of God, and the victims of his wrath.

It is by the assistance of this fable, that the Christian doctors perceive the fall of Adam, prepared by the Almighty himself, anterior to the creation of the world. ; Was it necessary that the Divinity should entertain a great desire that man might sin, since he would thereby have an opportunity of providing the means of making him sinful? In effect, it was the Devil who, in process of time, covered with the skin of a serpent,* solicited the mother of the human race to disobey God, and involve her husband in her rebellion. But the difficulty is not removed by these inventions. ; If Satan, in the time he was an angel, lived in innocence, and merited the good will of his Maker, how came God to suffer him to entertain ideas of pride, ambition, and rebellion? How came this angel of light so blind as not to see the folly of such an enterprize? ; Did he not know that his Creator was all-powerful? ; Who was it that tempted Satan?

* Naturalists tell us the serpent casts its skin.
; Did Satan creep into the skin of one?

What reason had the Divinity for selecting him to be the object of his fury, the destroyer of his projects, the enemy of his power? If pride be a sin, if the idea itself of rebellion is the greatest of crimes, *sin was, then, anterior to sin*, and Lucifer offended God, even in his state of purity! for, in fine, a being pure, innocent, agreeable to his God, who had all the perfections of which a creature could be susceptible, ought to be exempt from ambition, pride, and folly. We ought, also, to say as much for our first parent, who, notwithstanding his wisdom, his innocence, and the knowledge infused into him by God himself, could not prevent himself from falling into the temptation of a demon.

— Hence, in every shift, the priests invariably make God the author of sin. It was God who tempted Lucifer before the creation of the world; Lucifer, in his turn, became the tempter of man, and the cause of all the evil our race suffers. It appears, therefore, that God created both angels and men to give them an opportunity of sinning.

It is easy to perceive the absurdity of this system, to save which the theologians have invented another still more absurd, that it might become the foundation of all their religious revelations, and by means of which they idly imagine they can fully justify the divine providence. The system of truth supposes the *free will* of man—that he is his own master, capable of doing good or ill, and of directing his own plans. At the words *free will*, I already perceive, Madam, that you tremble, and doubtless anticipate

a metaphysical dissertation. Rest assured of the contrary; for I flatter myself that the question will be simplified and rendered clear, I shall not merely say for you, but for all your sex, who are not resolved to be wilfully blind.

To say that man is a free agent, say the priests, is to detract from the power of the Supreme Being, to pretend that God is not the master of his will; to encourage a weak creature to revolt against his creator, to derange his plans, to disturb the order in which he delights, to render his works useless, and thereby excite in him passions, and wrath, like what we see among ourselves. Thus, at first sight, you discover from this principle, a crowd of absurdities. If God is the friend of order, all who are his creatures ought necessarily to be inspired to maintain order; without this, the divine will ceases to have its effect. If God has his own plans, they ought always, and of necessity, to be executed; if man has the power to harass the divine mind, and to fill it with anger, man is the master of God's happiness, and the league he has made with Satan is strong enough to dissipate the projects of the divinity. - In a word, if man is free to commit sin, God is no longer omnipotent.

They reply to us, that God, without compromising his omnipotence, might give man freedom of action—that this freedom, or liberty, is a benefit by which God intends to give him the ability of meriting his goodness; but on the other hand, this liberty does not yield him sufficient ability to merit his hatred, by offending and en-

couraging others to commit crimes: from whence I conclude, that this liberty is not only a benefit, but consistent with the divine goodness. This goodness would be more real, if men had always sufficient resolution to do what is pleasing to God, conformably to order, and conducive to the happiness of their fellow-creatures. If men, in virtue of their liberty, do things contrary to the will of God, God who is supposed to have the prescience of foreseeing all, ought to have taken measures to prevent men from abusing their liberty; if he foresaw they would sin, he ought to have given them the means of avoiding it; if he could not prevent them from doing ill, he has consented to the ill they have done; if he has consented, he should not be offended; if he is offended, or if he punish them for the evil they have done with his permission, he is unjust and cruel; if he suffer them to rush on to their destruction, he is bound afterwards to take them to himself, and he cannot with reason find fault with them for the abuse of their liberty, in being deceived or seduced, by the objects which he himself had placed in their way to seduce them, to tempt them, and to determine their wills to do evil.

¿ What would you say of a father who should give to his children, in the infancy of age, and when they were without experience, the liberty of satisfying their disordered appetites, till they should convince themselves of their evil tendency? ¿ Would not such a parent be in the right, to feel uneasy at the abuse which they should make of their liberty which he had given them?

¿ Would it not be accounted malice in this parent, who should have foreseen what was to happen, not to have furnished his children with the capacity of directing their own conduct, so as to avoid the evils they might be assailed with? ¿ Would it not show in him the height of madness, were he to punish them for the evil which he had done, and the chagrin which they occasioned him; would it not be to himself that we should ascribe the sottishness and wickedness of his children?

You see, then, the points of view under which this system of men's free-will shows us the Deity. This free-will becomes a present the most dangerous, since it puts man in the condition of doing evil that is truly frightful. We may thence conclude, that this system, far from justifying God, makes him capable of malice, imprudence and injustice. But this is to overturn all our ideas of a being perfectly, nay, infinitely wise and good, consenting to punish his creatures for sins which he gave them the power of committing, or, which is the same, suffering the Devil to inspire them with evil. All the subtilties of theology tend really to destroy the notions which are given us from the book of nature, of its Author. This theology is evidently the mythology of the heathens. However, our doctors have fancied they have found means to support their ruinous suppositions. You have more than once heard of *predestination* and *grace*—¿ terrible words! which create among us disputes, at which reason would be compelled to blush, if the Christians had not come to the resolution to

renounce their intellects, and which have not less fatal consequences to society. But do not you be surprised; these false and obscure principles have even among the theologians produced dissensions: and their quarrels would be indifferent, if they did not attach more importance to them than they really deserve.

But to proceed. The system of predestination supposes, that God, in his eternal secrets, has resolved that some men should be elected, and, being thus his favourites, receive special grace. By this grace they are supposed to be made agreeable to God, and meet for eternal happiness. But then an infinite number of others are destined to perdition, and receive not the grace necessary to eternal salvation. These contradictory and opposite propositions make it pretty evident that the system is absurd. It makes God, a being infinitely perfect and good, a partial tyrant, who has created a vast number of human beings to be the sport of his caprice, and the victims of his vengeance. It supposes that God will punish his creatures for not having received that grace which he did not deign to give them; it presents this God to us under traits so revolting, that the theologians are forced to avow that the whole is a profound mystery, into which the human mind cannot penetrate. ; But if man is not made to lift his inquisitive eye on this frightful mystery, that is to say, on this astonishing absurdity, which our teachers have idly endeavoured to square to their views of Deity; or to reconcile the atrocious injustice of their God with his infinite

goodness, ; by what right do they wish us to adore this mystery which they would compel us to believe, and to subscribe to an opinion that saps the divine goodness to its very foundation? ; How do they reason upon a dogma, and quarrel with acrimony, about a system of which even themselves can comprehend nothing?

The more you examine this religion, the more you will have occasion to be convinced, that the things which its teachers call mysteries, are clusters of difficulties which embarrass themselves; that when they cannot steer clear of the dilemma into which their absurdities plunge them, their false principles are resorted to; but these leave them where they found them. This phrase, *mystery*, is not suited to our comprehension; even these grave teachers themselves do not understand the things they talk of without ceasing; they invent erroneous words to explain matters more so, and they give the name of mysteries to things they understand as little as we do.

All the religions in the world are founded on predestination; all the revelations among mankind, as you have been already told, suppose this odious dogma which makes Providence an unjust master, who shows a blind predilection for some of his children, to the prejudice of others. — They make God a tyrant, who punishes the faults of men whom he has not created faultless, and pardons those whom he has allowed to go astray. This dogma, which has served as the basis of Paganism, is also the grand pivot of the Christian religion; the Lord of

which doth not exercise less hatred to his worshippers, than the divinities of the wickedest idolaters. With such notions, is it not astonishing that this God should appear to those who meditate on his attributes, an object sufficiently terrible to agitate the imagination, and to lead some to indulge in dangerous follies ?

The dogma of another life serves also to exculpate the Deity from these apparent injustices or aberrations, with which he might naturally be accused. It is pretended, that it has pleased him to distinguish his friends on earth, seeing he has amply provided for their future happiness in an abode prepared for their souls. But as I believe I have already hinted, these proofs that God makes some good, and leaves others wicked, either evince injustice on his part, at least temporary, or they contradict his Omnipotence. If God can do all things, if he is privy to all the thoughts and actions of men, what need has he of any proofs ? If he has resolved to give them grace necessary to save them, has he not assured them they will not perish ? If he is unjust and cruel, this God is not immutable, and belies his character ? at least for a time he derogates from the perfections which we should expect to find in him. What would you think of a king, who, during a particular time, would discover to his favourites traits the most frightful, in order that they might incur his disgrace, and who should afterwards insist on their believing him a very good and amiable man, to obtain his favour again ? Would not such a prince be pronounced wicked, fanciful, and ty-

rannical ? Nevertheless, this supposed prince might be pardoned by some, if for his own interest, and the better to assure himself of the attachment of his friends, he might give them some smiles of his favour. It is not so with God, who knows all, who can do all, who has nothing to fear from the dispositions of his creatures. From all these reasonings, we may see that the Deity, whom the priests have conjured up, plays a great game, very ridiculous, very unjust, on the supposition that he tries his servants, and that he allows them to suffer in this world, to prepare them for another. The theologians have not failed to discover motives in this conduct of God, which they can as readily justify ; but these pretended motives are borrowed from the Omnipotence of this being, by his absolute power over his creatures, to whom he is not obliged to render an account of his actions ; but especially in this theology, which professes to justify God, do we not see it make him a despot and tyrant more hateful than any of his creatures ?

I am, &c.

LETTER V.

ALLOW me now, Madam, to proceed with you to an examination of the dogma of a future life, in which it is supposed, that the Deity, after having suffered men to be tempted with the trials and difficulties of this life ; in fine, to as-

sure himself whether they are worthy of his love or hatred, that he may bestow on them rewards or inflict on them the punishment which they deserve. This dogma, which is one of the capital points of the Christian religion, is founded on a great many hypotheses or suppositions, which we have already glanced at, and which we have shown to be absurd and incompatible with the notions which the same religion gives us of the Deity. In effect, it supposes us capable of offending or pleasing the Author of Nature, of influencing his humour or exciting his passions; afflicting, tormenting, resisting, and thwarting the plans of Deity. It supposes, moreover, the free-will of man, a system which we have seen incompatible with the goodness, justice, and omnipotence of the Deity. It supposes, further, that God has occasion of proving his creatures, and making them, if I may so speak, pass a noviciate to know what they are worth when he shall square accounts with them. - It supposes in God, who has created men for happiness only, the inability to put, by one grand effort, all men in the road, whence they may infallibly arrive at permanent felicity. It supposes that man will survive himself, or that the same being after death, will continue to think, to feel, and act as he did in this life. In a word, it supposes the immortality of the soul; an opinion unknown to the Jewish law-giver, who is totally silent on this topic to the people to whom God had manifested himself; an opinion which even in the time of Jesus Christ one sect at Jerusalem admitted, while

another sect rejected; an opinion about which the Messiah, who came to instruct them, deigned to fix the ideas of those who might deceive themselves, in this respect; an opinion which appears to have been engendered in Egypt, or in India, anterior to the Jewish religion, but which was unknown among the Hebrews, till they took occasion to instruct themselves in the Pagan philosophy of the Greeks, and doctrines of Plato.

Whatever might be the origin of this doctrine, it was eagerly adopted by the Christians, who judged it very convenient to their system of religion, all the parts of which are founded on the marvellous, and which made it a crime to admit any truths agreeable to reason and common sense. Thus, without going back to the inventors of this inconceivable dogma, let us examine dispassionately what this opinion really is; let us endeavour to penetrate to the principles on which it is supported; let us adopt it, if we shall find it an idea conformable to reason; let us reject it, if it shall appear destitute of proof, and at variance with common sense, even though it had been received as an established truth in all antiquity, though it may have been adopted by many millions of mankind.

Those who maintain the opinion of the soul's immortality regard it, that is, the soul, as a being distinct from the body, as a substance, or essence, totally different from the corporeal frame, and they designate it by the name of *spirit*. If we ask them what a spirit is, they tell us it is not matter; and if we ask them what they un-

derstand by that which is not matter, which is the only thing of which we cannot form an idea, they tell us it is a spirit. In general, it is easy to see that men the most savage, as well as the most subtle thinkers, make use of the word *spirit* to designate all the causes of which they cannot form clear notions; hence the word spirit hath been used to designate a being of which none can form any idea.

Notwithstanding, the divines pretend, that this unknown being, entirely different from the body, of a substance which has nothing conformable with itself, is, nevertheless, capable of setting the body in motion; and this, doubtless, is a mystery very inconceivable. We have noticed the alliance between this spiritual substance and the material body, whose functions it regulates. As the divines have supposed that matter could neither think, nor will, nor perceive, they have believed that it might conceive much better those operations attributed to a being of which they had ideas less clear than they can form of matter. In consequence, they have imagined many gratuitous suppositions to explain the union of the soul with the body. In fine, in the impossibility of overcoming the insurmountable barriers which oppose them, the priests have made man twofold, by supposing that he contains something distinct from himself; they have cut through all difficulties by saying that this union is a great mystery which man cannot understand; and they have everlasting recourse to the omnipotence of God, to his supreme will, to the miracles which he has al-

ways wrought; and those last are never-failing, final resources, which the theologians reserve for every case wherein they can find no other mode of escaping gracefully from the argument of their adversaries.

You see, then, to what we reduce all the jargon of the metaphysicians, all the profound reveries which for so many ages have been so industriously hawked about in defence of the soul of man; an immaterial substance, of which no living being can form an idea; a spirit, that is to say a being totally different from any thing we know. All the theological verbiage ends here, by telling us, in a round of pompous terms, fooleries that impose on the ignorant—that we do not know what essence the soul is of; but we call it a spirit because of its nature, and because we feel ourselves agitated by some unknown agent; we cannot comprehend the mechanism of the soul; yet can we feel ourselves moved, as it were, by an effect of the power of God, whose essence is far removed from ours, and more concealed from us than the human soul itself. By the aid of this language, from which you cannot possibly learn any thing, you will be as wise, Madam, as all the theologians in the world!

If you would desire to form ideas the most precise of yourself, banish from you the prejudices of a vain theology, which only consists in repeating words without attaching any new ideas to them, and which are insufficient to distinguish the soul from the body, which appear only capable of multiplying beings without rea-

son, of rendering more incomprehensible, and more obscure, notions less distinct than we already have of ourselves. These notions should be at least the most simple, and the most exact, if we consult our nature, experience, and reason. They prove that man knows nothing but by his material sensible organs, that he sees only by his eyes, that he feels by his touch, that he hears by his ears; and that when either of those organs is actually deranged, or has been previously wanting or imperfect, man can have none of the ideas that organ is capable of furnishing him with, neither thoughts, memory, reflection, judgment, desire, or will. Experience shows us, that corporeal and material beings, are alone capable of being moved and acted upon; and that without those organs we have enumerated, the soul thinks not, feels not, wills not, nor is moved. - Every thing shows us that the soul undergoes always the same vicissitudes as the body; it grows to maturity, gains strength, becomes weak, and puts on old age like the body; in fine, every thing we can understand of it, goes to prove that it perishes with the body; at least, we want proofs to convince us, how that, which sees, feels, tastes, smells, and hears, by means of the organs of sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing, shall exist when the organs that communicate these sensations to it are levelled with the dust. In short, the soul seems to exist only through the bodily organs; destroy them; kill the body; the soul will be incapable of feeling, of sensibility.

Every thing we hear about the soul, con-

spires to prove it is the same with our body, connected relatively to some one or other of its faculties, less visible to our understanding, than it may be to beings of a superior nature. Every thing serves to convince us, that without the body the soul is nothing, and that all the operations which are attributed to the soul cannot be exercised any longer when the body is destroyed. Our body is a machine, which so long as we live, is susceptible of producing the effects which have been designated under different names, one from another; sentiment is one of these effects, thought is another, reflection a third. This last passes sometimes by other names, and our brain appears to be the seat of all our organs: it is that which is the most susceptible. This organic machine, once destroyed or deranged, is no longer capable of producing the same effects, or of exercising the same functions. It is with our body as it is with a watch which indicates the hours, and which goes not if the spring or a pinion be broken.

Cease, Eugenia, cease to torment yourself about the fate which shall attend you when death will have separated you from all that is dear on earth. After the dissolution of this life, the soul shall cease to exist; those devouring flames with which you have been threatened by the priests, will have no effect upon the soul, which can neither be susceptible then of pleasures or pains, of agreeable or sorrowful ideas, of lively or doleful reflections.

It is only by means of the bodily organs that

we feel, think, and are merry or sad, happy or miserable ; this body once reduced to dust, we will neither have perceptions nor sensations, and, by consequence, neither memory nor ideas; the dispersed particles will no longer have the same qualities they possessed when united ; nor will they any longer conspire to produce the same effects. In a word, the body being destroyed, the soul, which is merely a result of all the parts of the body in action, will cease to be what it is ; it will be reduced to nothing with the life's breath.

Our teachers pretend to understand the soul well, they profess to be able to distinguish it from the body ; in short, they can do nothing without it ; and therefore to keep up the farce, they have been compelled to admit the ridiculous dogma of the Persians, known by the name of the *resurrection*. This system supposes, that the particles of the body which have been scattered at death, will be collected at the last day to be replaced in their primitive condition. But that this strange phenomenon may take place, it is necessary that the particles of our destroyed bodies, of which some have been converted into earth, others have passed into plants, others into animals, some of one species, others of another, even of our own ; it is requisite, I say, that these particles, of which some have been mixed with the waters of the deep, others have been carried on the wings of the wind ; it is requisite that these particles, some of which have belonged at one time to one person, at another to another ; particles which have nourished the

grass of a church-yard, on which a sheep, or an ox, or a goose has fed, and on which sheep, or ox, or goose, the pampered priest has afterwards fed, till he again became food for his successor, and so on; it is necessary that these particles, so evanescent in name, so common to so many different individuals, of so many different species of animals, or even of vegetables, should be re-united to reproduce the individual to whom they formerly belonged. If you cannot get over this impossibility, the theologians will explain it to you by saying, very briefly, “Ah! it is a profound mystery, which we cannot comprehend.” They will inform you, that the resurrection is a miracle, a supernatural effect, which is to result from the divine power. It is thus they overcome all the difficulties which the good sense of a few opposes to their rhapsodies.

If, perchance, Madam, you do not wish to remain content with these sublime reasons, against which your good sense will naturally revolt, the parsons, who have left no stone unturned that they might seduce the imagination of mankind by vague pictures of the ineffable pleasures to be enjoyed in Paradise by the bodies and souls of those who have been predestinated, will warn you against refusing to credit on their word, without examination, what they proclaim, as if they had journeyed into the other world, and returned fraught with its secrets; nay, they will bid you, at your peril, refuse to disbelieve the jargon of nonsense which they thunder forth, and which they say, if you do not believe, God will heap on you his eternal indig-

nation! Thus they alarm your imagination by horrifying pictures of the eternal cruelties of God, and torments of man; as if a beneficent Being had prepared a host of creatures to suffer so much and so long for his mirth or madness.

But if you consider the thing coolly, you will perceive the futility of their flattering promises, and of their puny threatenings, which are uttered merely to catch the unwary. You may easily discover, that if it could be true, that man shall survive himself, God, in recompensing him, would only recompense himself for the grace which he had granted; and when he punished him, he punished him for not receiving the grace which he had hardened him against receiving. This line of conduct, so cruel and barbarous, appears equally unworthy of a wise God as it is of a being perfectly good.

If your mind, proof against the terrours with which the Christian religion penetrates its sectaries, is capable of contemplating these frightful circumstances, which it is imagined will accompany the punishments which God has destined for the victims of his vengeance, you will find that they are impossible and totally incompatible with all the ideas which we can form of the Divinity. In a word, you will perceive, that the chastisements of another life are but a crowd of chimeras, invented to disturb human reason, to subjugate it beneath the feet of imposture, to annihilate for ever the repose of slaves, whom the priesthood would enthrall and retain under its yoke.

In short, Eugenia, the priests would make you

believe that these torments will be horrible, a thing which accords not with our ideas of God's goodness; they tell you they will be eternal, a thing which accords not with our ideas of the justice of God, who, one would very naturally suppose, will proportion chastisements to faults, and who, by consequence, will not punish without end, the beings whose actions are bounded by time. They tell us, that the offences against God are infinite, and, by consequence, that the Divinity, without doing violence to his justice, may avenge himself as God, that is to say, avenge himself to infinity. In this case, I shall say, that this God is not good; that he is vindictive, a character which always announces fear and weakness. In fine, I shall say, that among the imperfect beings who compose the human species, there is not, perhaps, a single one who, without some advantage to himself, without personal fear, in a word, without folly, would consent to punish everlastingly the wretch who might have the misfortune to offend him, but who no longer had either the ability or the inclination to commit another offence. Caligula found, at least, some little amusement to forsake for a time the cares of government, and enjoy the spectacle of punishment which he inflicted on those unfortunate men whom he had an interest in destroying. ; But what advantage can it be to God to heap on the damned everlasting torments? ; Will this amuse him? ; Will their frightful punishments correct their faults? ; Can these examples of the divine severity be of any service to those on earth, who witness not their

friends in hell? ; Will it not be the most astonishing of all the miracles of Deity, to make the bodies of the damned invulnerable—to resist, through the ceaseless ages of eternity, the frightful torments destined for them?

You see then, Madam, that the ideas which the priests give us of hell, make of God a being infinitely more insensible, more wicked and cruel than the most barbarous of men. They add to all this, that it will be the Devil and the apostate angels, that is to say, the enemies of God, whom he will employ as the ministers of his implacable vengeance. These wicked spirits, then, will execute the commands which this severe judge will pronounce against men at the last judgment. For you must know, Madam, that a God, who knows all, will at some future time take an account of what he already knows. So then, not content with judging men at death, he will assemble the whole human race with great pomp at the last or general judgment, in which he will confirm his sentence in the view of the whole human race, assembled to receive their doom. Thus, on the wreck of the world, will he pronounce a definitive judgment, from which there will be no appeal.

But, in attending this memorable judgment, ; what will become of the souls of men, separated from their bodies, which have not yet been resuscitated? The souls of the just will go directly to enjoy the blessings of Paradise; ; but what is to become of the immense crowd of souls imbued with faults or crimes, and on whom the infallible parsons, who are so well instructed

in what is passing in another world, cannot speak with certainty as to their fate? According to some of these wiseacres, God will place the souls of such as are not wholly displeasing to him, in a place of punishment, where by rigorous torments they shall have the merit of expiating the faults with which they may stand chargeable at death. According to this fine system, so profitable to our spiritual guides, God has found it the most simple method to build a fiery furnace for the special purpose of tormenting a certain proportion of souls who have not been sufficiently purified at death to enter Paradise, but who, after leaving them some years united with the body, and giving them time necessary to arrive at that amendment of life, by which they may become partakers of the supreme felicity of heaven, ordains that they shall expiate their offences in torment. It is on this ridiculous notion that our priests have bottomed the doctrine of *purgatory*, which every good Catholic is obliged to believe for the benefit of the priests, who reserve to themselves, as is very reasonable, the power of compelling by their prayers a just and immutable God to relax in his sternness, and liberate the captive souls, which he had only condemned to undergo this purgation, in order that they might be made meet for the joys of Paradise.

With respect to the Protestants who are, as every one knows, heretics and impious, you will observe that they pretend not to those lucrative views of the Roman doctors. ; On the contrary, they think that, at the instant of death, every man is irrevocably judged ; that he goes directly

to glory, or into a place of punishment, to suffer the award of evil by the enduring of punishments for which God had eternally prepared both the sufferer and his torments! ; Even before the re-union of soul and body, at the final judgment, they fancy that the soul of the wicked, (which on the principle of all souls being *spirits* must be the same in essence as the soul of the elect,) will, though deprived of those organs by which it felt and thought and acted, be capable of undergoing the agency or action of a fire! It is true that some Protestant theologians tell us, that the fire of hell is a spiritual fire, and by consequence very different from the material fire vomited out of Vesuvius, and *Ætna*, and *Hecla*. Nor ought we to doubt that these informed doctors of the Protestant faith know very well what they say, and that they have as precise and clear ideas of a spiritual fire as they have of the ineffable joys of paradise, which may be as spiritual as the punishment of the damned in hell.

Such are, Madam, in a few words, the absurdities, not less revolting than ridiculous, which the dogmas of a future life and of the immortality of the soul have engendered in the minds of men. Such are the phantoms which have been invented and propagated, to seduce and alarm mortals, to excite their hopes and their fears; such the illusions that so powerfully operate on weak and feeling beings. But lest these gloomy ideas should have too much influence in depressing the imagination, and banishing from it the agreeable thoughts which the variegated scenes

of life so naturally and so frequently furnish us with, the priests have always insisted more forcibly on what men have to fear on the part of a terrible God, than on what they have to hope from the mercy of a forgiving Deity, full of goodness. Princes the most wicked are infinitely more respected than those who are famed for indulgence and humanity. — The priests have had the art to throw us into uncertainty and mistrust by the two-fold character which they have given the divinity. — If they promise us salvation, they tell us that we must work it out for ourselves, “with fear and trembling.” It is thus that they have contrived to inspire the minds of the most honest men with dismay and doubt, repeating without ceasing, that time only must disclose who are worthy of the divine love, or who are to be the objects of the divine wrath. Terrour has been, and always will be the most certain means of corrupting and enslaving the mind of man.

They will tell us, doubtless, that the terrors which religion inspires, are salutary terrors : that the dogma of another life is a bridle sufficiently powerful to prevent the commission of crimes, and restrain men within the path of duty. To undeceive one’s self of this maxim, so often thundered in our ears, and so generally adopted on the authority of the priests, we have only to open our eyes. Nevertheless, we see some Christians thoroughly persuaded of another life, who, notwithstanding, conduct themselves as if they had nothing to fear on the part of a God of vengeance, nor any thing to hope from a God of

mercy. - When any of these are engaged in some great project, at all times they are tempted by some strong passion, or by some bad habit, they shut their eyes on another life, they see not the enraged judge, they suffer themselves to sin, and when it is committed, they comfort themselves by saying, that God is good. Besides, they console themselves by the same contradictory religion which shows them also this same God, whom it represents so susceptible of wrath, as full of mercy, bestowing his grace on all those who are sensible of their evils and repent. In a word, I see none whom the fears of hell will restrain, when passion or interest solicit obedience. - The very priests, who make so many efforts to convince us of their dogmas, too often evince more wickedness of conduct than we find in those who have never heard one word about another life. Those who from infancy have been taught these terrifying lessons, are neither less debauched, nor less proud, nor less passionate, nor less unjust, nor less avaricious than others, who have lived and died ignorant of Christian purgatory and paradise. In fine, the dogma of another life has little or no influence on them; it annihilates none of their passions; it is a bridle merely with some few timid souls, who, without its knowledge, would never have the hardihood to be guilty of any great excesses. - This dogma is very fit to disturb the quiet of some honest, timorous persons, and the credulous, whose imagination it inflames, without ever staying the hand of great rogues, without imposing on them more than

the decency of civilization, and a specious morality of life, restrained chiefly by the coercion of public laws.

In short, to sum all up in one thought, I behold a religion gloomy and formidable to make impressions very lively, very deep, and very dangerous on a mind such as yours, although it makes but very momentary impressions on the minds of such as are hardened in crime, or whose dissipation destroys constantly the effects of its threats. More lively affected than others by your principles, you have been but too often and too seriously occupied for your happiness, by gloomy and harassing objects, which have powerfully affected your sensible imagination, though the same phantoms that have pursued you have been altogether banished from the mind of those who have had neither your virtues, your understanding, nor your sensibility.

According to his principles, a Christian must always live in fear; he can never know with certainty whether he pleases or displeases God; the least movement of pride, or of covetousness, the least desire, will suffice to merit the divine anger, and lose in one moment the fruits of years of devotion. It is not surprising, that with these frightful principles before them, many Christians should endeavour to find in solitude, employment for their lugubrious reflections, where they may avoid the occasions that solicit them to do wrong, and embrace such means as are most likely, according to their notions of the likelihood of the thing, to expiate the faults which they fancy might incur the eternal vengeance of God.

Thus the dark notions of a future life, leave those only in peace who think notoriously upon it; they are very disconsolate to all those whose temperament determines them to contemplate it. They are but the atrocious ideas, however, which the priests study to give us of the Deity, and by which they have compelled so many worthy people to throw themselves into the arms of incredulity. If some libertines, incapable of reasoning, abjure a religion troublesome to their passions, or which abridges their pleasures, there are very many who have maturely examined it, that have been disgusted with it, because they could not consent to live in the fears it engendered, nor to nourish the despair it created. They have then abjured this religion, fit only to fill the soul with inquietudes, that they might find in the bosom of reason the repose which it ensures to good sense.

Times of the greatest crimes are always times of the greatest ignorance. - It is in these times, or usually so, that the greatest noise is made about religion. Men then follow mechanically, and without examination, the tenets which their priests impose on them, without ever diving to the bottom of their doctrines. - In proportion as mankind become enlightened, great crimes become more rare, the manners of men are more polished, the sciences are cultivated, and the religion which they have coolly and carefully examined, loses sensibly its credit. It is thus that we now see so many incredulous people in the bosom of society become more agreeable and complacent now than formerly, when they

were governed by the caprice of a priest who crammed them with difficulties, which himself for a small sum could go through with God, and thus secure for the credulous the hope of Heaven. The deeper the purse of the votary, the surer was Heaven to him at death; the more the priests felt of the gold, the more apparent was Paradise to the giver of the "filthy lucre."

Religion is consoling only to those who have no embarrassment about it; the indefinite and vague recompence which it promises, without giving ideas of it, is made to deceive those who make no reflections on the impatient, variable, false, and cruel character which this religion gives of its God. ; But how can it make any promises on the part of a God whom it represents as a tempter, a seducer, who appears, moreover, to take pleasure in laying the most dangerous snares for his weak creatures? ; How can it reckon on the favours of a God full of caprice, whom it alternately informs us is replete with tenderness or with hatred? ; By what right does it hold out to us the rewards of a despotic and tyrannical God, who does or does not choose men for happiness, and who consults only his own fantasy to destine some of his creatures to bliss and others to perdition? Nothing, doubtless, but the blindest enthusiasm could induce mortals to place confidence in such a God as the priests have feigned; it is to folly alone we must attribute the love some well-meaning people profess to the God of the parsons; it is matchless extravagance alone

that could prevail on men to reckon on the unknown rewards which are promised them by this religion, at the same time that it assures us, that God is the author of grace, but that we have no right to expect any thing from him.

In a word, Madam, the notions of another life, far from consoling, are fit only to embitter all the sweets of the present life. After the sad and gloomy ideas which Christianity, always at variance with itself, presents us with of its God, it then affirms, that we are much more likely to incur his terrible chastisements, than possessed of power by which we may merit ineffable rewards; and it proceeds to inform us, that God will give grace to whomsoever he pleases, yet it remains with themselves whether they escape damnation; and a life the most spotless cannot warrant them to presume that they are worthy of his favour. In good truth, would not total annihilation be preferable to such beings rather than falling into the hands of a Deity so hard-hearted? Would not every man of sense prefer the idea of complete annihilation to that of a future existence, in order to be the sport of the eternal caprice of a Deity, so cruel as to damn and torment, without end, the unfortunate beings whom he created so weak, that he might punish them for faults inseparable from their nature? — If God is good, as we are assured, notwithstanding the cruelties of which the priests suppose him capable, is it not more consonant to all our ideas of a being perfectly good, to believe that he did not create them to sport with them in a state of eternal

damnation, which they had not the power of choosing, or of rejecting and shunning? ; Has not the God whom the theologians have conjured up, treated the beasts of the field more favourably than he has treated man, since he has exempted them from sin, and by consequence has not exposed them to suffer an eternal unhappiness?

The dogma of the immortality of the soul, or of a future life, presents nothing consoling in the Christian religion. On the contrary it was calculated expressly to fill the heart of the Christian, following out his principles, with bitterness and continual alarm. I appeal to yourself, Madam, ; whether these sublime notions have any thing consoling in them? Whenever this uncertain idea has presented itself to your mind, ; has it not filled you with a cold and secret horror?

The consciousness of a life so virtuous and so spotless, should doubtless be capable of securing you against those fears which the priests throw around your sex. Doubtless it does so, else ; are you not inspired with the idea of a being jealous, severe, capricious, whose eternal disgrace the highest fault is sure of incurring, and in whose eyes the smallest weakness, or freedom the most involuntary, is sufficient to cancel years of strict observance of all the rules of propriety and religion?

I know very well what you will advance to support yourself in your prejudices. The ministers of religion possess the secret of tempering the alarms which they have the art to excite.

They strive to inspire confidence in those minds which they discover accessible to fear. They balance, thus, one passion against another.— They hold in suspense the minds of their slaves, in the apprehension that too much confidence would only render them less pliable, or that despair would force them to throw off the yoke. To persons terribly frightened about their state after death, they speak only of the hopes which we may entertain of the goodness of God. To those who have too much confidence, they preach up the terrours of the Lord, and the judgments of a severe God. By this chicanery they contrive, like wily politicians, to keep under their yoke the pliable and the obstinate; all those who are weak enough to be led by the contradictory doctrines of these blind guides.

They tell you, besides, that the sentiment of the immortality of the soul is inherent in man; that the soul is consumed by boundless desires, and that since there is nothing on this earth capable of satisfying it, these are indubitable proofs that it is destined to subsist eternally. In a word, that as we naturally desire to exist always, we may naturally conclude that we shall always exist. But ; what think you Madam, of such reasonings? ; To what do they lead? ; Do we desire the continuation of this existence, because it may be blessed and happy, or because we know not what may become of us? But we cannot desire a miserable existence, or, at least, one in which it is more than probable we may be miserable rather than happy. If, as the Christian religion so often repeats, the number

of the elect is very small, and salvation very difficult, the number of the reprobate very great, and damnation very easily obtained, ¿ who is he who would desire to exist always with so evident a risk of being eternally damned?— ¿ Would it not have been better for us not to have been born, than to have been compelled against our nature to play a game so fraught with peril? ¿ Does not annihilation itself present to us an idea preferable to that of an existence which may very easily lead us to eternal tortures? Suffer me, Madam, to appeal to yourself. ¿ If before you had come into this world, you had had your choice of being born, or of not seeing the light of this fair sun, you could have been made to comprehend, but for one moment, the hundred thousandth part of the risks you run to be eternally unhappy, would you not have determined never to enjoy life?

It is an easy matter, then, to perceive the proofs on which the priests pretend to found this dogma of the immortality of the soul and a future life. The desire which we might have of it could only be founded on the hope of enjoying eternal happiness. But ¿ does religion give us this assurance? — Yes, say the clergy, if you submit faithfully to the rules it prescribes. But to conform one's self to these rules, ¿ is it not necessary to have grace from Heaven? And, ¿ are we then sure we shall obtain that grace, or if we do, merit Heaven? ¿ Do the priests not repeat to us, without ceasing, that God is the author of grace, and that he only gives it to a

small number of the elect? ; Do they not daily tell us that, except one man, who rendered himself worthy of this eternal happiness, there are millions going the high road to damnation? It is plain, that every Christian who would so reason, would be a fool, to desire a future existence which he has so many motives to fear, or to reckon on a happiness which every thing conspires to show him is as uncertain, as difficult to be obtained, as it is unequivocally dependent on the fantasies of a capricious Deity, who sports with the misfortunes of his creatures.

Under every point of view in which we regard the dogma of the soul's immortality, we are compelled to consider it as a chimera invented by men who have realized their wishes, or who have not been able to justify Providence from the transitory injustices of this world. This dogma was received with avidity, because it flattered the desires, and especially the vanity of man, who arrogated to himself a superiority above all the beings that enjoy existence, and which he would pass by and reduce to mere clay; who believed himself the favourite of God, without ever taxing his attention with this other fact, that God makes him every instant experience vicissitudes, calamities, and trials, as all sentient natures experience; that God made him, in fine to undergo death, or dissolution, which is an invariable law that all that exists must find verified. This haughty creature, who fancies himself a privileged being, alone agreeable to his Maker, does not perceive that there are stages in his life when his existence is more un-

certain and much more weak than that of the other animals, or even of some inanimate things. Man is unwilling to admit, that he possesses not the strength of the lion, nor the swiftness of the stag, nor the durability of an oak, nor the solidity of marble, or metal. — He believes himself the greatest favourite, the most sublime, the most noble ; he believes himself superior to all other animals, because he possesses the faculties of thinking, judging and reasoning. But his thoughts only render him more wretched than all the animals whom he supposes deprived of this faculty, or who, at least, he believes, do not enjoy it in the same degree with himself. ; Do not the faculties of thinking, of remembering, of foresight, too often render him unhappy by the very idea of the past, the present, and the future ? ; Do not his passions drive him to excesses unknown to the other animals ? ; Are his judgments always reasonable and wise ? ; Is reason too well developed in many men that the priests interdict its use as dangerous ? ; Are mankind sufficiently advanced in knowledge to be able to overcome the prejudices and chimeras which render them unhappy during the greatest part of their lives ? In fine, ; have the beasts some species of religious impressions, which inspire continual terrors in their breast, making them look upon some awful event, which embitters their softest pleasures, which enjoins them to torment themselves, and which threaten them with eternal damnation ? ; No !

In truth, Madam, if you weigh in an equitable balance the pretended advantages of man above

the other animals, you will soon see how evanescent is this fictitious superiority which he has arrogated to himself. — We find that all the productions of nature are submitted to the same laws ; that all beings are only born to die ; they produce their like to destroy themselves ; that all sentient beings are compelled to undergo pleasures and pains ; they appear and they disappear ; they are and they cease to be ; they evince under one form that they will quit it to produce another. Such are the continual vicissitudes to which every thing that exists is evidently subjected, and from which man is not exempt, any more than the other beings and productions that he appropriates to his use as *lord of the creation*. Even our globe itself undergoes change ; the seas change their place ; the mountains are gathered in heaps or levelled into plains ; every thing that breathes is destroyed at last, and man alone pretends to an eternal duration.

It is unnecessary to tell me, that we degrade man when we compare him with the beasts, deprived of souls and intelligence ; this is no levelling doctrine, but one which places him exactly where nature places him, but from which his vanity has unfortunately driven him. All beings are equals ; under various and different forms they act differently ; they are governed in their appetites and passions by laws which are invariably the same for all of the same species ; every thing which is composed of parts will be dissolved ; every thing which has life, must part with it at death ; all men are equally compelled

- to submit to this fate, they are equal at death, although during life their power, their talents, and especially their virtues establish a marked difference, which though real is only momentary. ¶ What will they be after death? - They will be exactly what they were ten years before they were born.

Banish then, Eugenia, from your mind for ever the terrors which death has hitherto filled you with. It is for the wretched a safe haven against the misfortunes of this life. ¶ If it appears a cruel alternative to those who enjoy the good things of this world, why do they not console themselves with the idea of what they do actually enjoy? Let them call reason to their aid; it will calm the inquietudes of their imagination, but too greatly alarmed; it will disperse the clouds which religion spreads over their minds; it will teach them, that this death, so terrible in apprehension, is really nothing, and that it will neither be accompanied with remembrance of past pleasures nor of sorrow now no more.

¶ Live, then, happy and tranquil, amiable Eugenia! Preserve carefully an existence so interesting and so necessary to all those with whom you live. Allow not your health to be injured, nor trouble your quiet with melancholy ideas. ¶ Without being teased by the prospect of an event which has no right to disturb your repose, cultivate virtue, which has always been your favourite, so necessary to your internal peace, and which has rendered you so dear to all those who have the happiness of being your friends! Let your rank, your credit, your

riches, your talents be employed to make others happy, to support the oppressed, to succour the unfortunate, to dry up the tears of those whom you may have an opportunity of comforting! Let your mind be occupied about such agreeable and profitable employments as are likely to please you! Call in the aid of your reason to dissipate the phantoms which alarm you, to efface the prejudices which you have imbibed in early life! In a word, comfort yourself, and remember, that in practising virtue, as you do, you cannot become an object of hatred to God, who, if he has reserved in eternity rigorous punishments for the social virtues, will be the strangest, the most cruel, and the most insensible of beings!

You demand of me, perhaps, "In destroying the idea of another world, what is to become of the remorse, those chastisements, so useful to mankind, and so well calculated to restrain them within the bounds of propriety?" I reply, that remorse will always subsist as long as we shall be capable of feeling its pangs, even when we cease to fear the distant and uncertain vengeance of the Divinity. In the commission of crimes in allowing one's self to be the sport of passion, in injuring our species, in refusing to do them good, in stifling pity, every man, whose reason is not totally deranged, perceives clearly that he will render himself odious to others, that he ought to fear their enmity. He will blush, then, if he thinks he has rendered himself hateful and detestable in their eyes. He knows the continual need he has of their esteem and as-

sistance. Experience proves to him, that vices the most concealed are injurious to himself. He lives in perpetual fear lest some mishap should unfold his weaknesses and secret faults. It is from all these ideas that we are to look for regret and remorse, even in those who do not believe in the chimeras of another world. - With regard to those whose reason is deranged, those who are enervated by their passions, or perhaps linked to vice by the chains of habit, even with the prospect of Hell open before them, they will neither live less vicious, nor less wicked. An avenging God will never inflict on any man such a total want of reason as may make him regardless of public opinion, trample decency under foot, brave the laws, and expose himself to derision and human chastisements. Every man of sense easily understands, that in this world the esteem and affection of others are necessary for his happiness, and that life is but a burden to those who by their vices injure themselves, and render themselves reprehensible in the eyes of society.

The true means, Madam, of living happy in this world is to do good to your fellow-creatures; labour for the happiness of your species; this is the chief virtue, at least, it is to have virtue, and with virtue you will appear agreeable to others, and be without remorse yourself to the end of life. Remorse is a feeling that should be far from your bosom; the very word conjures up fears to the simple; it is a term which the wants and desires of all those who know you will strive to keep remote from your mind, that

you may always partake of that content and joy which every thing around you should create for your well-being, and multiply to your advantage as you glide through life to the bosom of nature.

I am, &c.

LETTER VI.

THE reflections, Madam, which I have already offered you in these letters ought, I conceive, to have sufficed to undeceive you, in a great measure, of the lugubrious and afflicting notions with which you have been inspired by religious prejudices. However, to fulfil the task which you have imposed on me, and to assist you in freeing yourself from the unfavourable ideas you may have imbibed from a system replete with irrelevancies and contradictions, I shall continue to examine the strange mysteries with which Christianity is adorned. They are founded on ideas so odd and so contrary to reason, that if from infancy we had not been familiarized with them, we should blush at our species in having for one instant believed and adopted them.

The Christians, scarcely content with the crowd of enigmas with which the books of the Jews are filled, have besides fancied they must add to them a great many incomprehensible mysteries, for which they have the most pro-

found veneration. Their impenetrable obscurity appears to be a sufficient motive among them for adding these. Their priests, encouraged by their credulity, which nothing can outdo, seem to be studious to multiply the articles of their faith, and the number of inconceivable objects which they have said must be received with submission, and adored even if not understood.

The first of these mysteries is the *Trinity*, which supposes that one God, self-existent, who is a pure spirit, is, nevertheless, composed of three Divinities, which have obtained the names of *persons*. These three Gods, who are designated under the respective names of the *Father*, the *Son*, and the *Holy Ghost*, are, nevertheless, but one God only. — These three persons are equal in power, in wisdom, in perfections; yet the second is subordinate to the first, in consequence of which he was compelled to become a man, and be the victim of the wrath of his Father. — This is what the priests call the mystery of the *incarnation*. Notwithstanding his innocence, his perfection, his purity, the Son of God became the object of the vengeance of a just God, who is the same as the Son in question, but who would not consent to appease himself but by the death of his own Son, who is a portion of himself. The Son of God, not content with becoming man, died without having sinned, for the salvation of men who had sinned. God preferred to the punishment of imperfect beings, whom he did not choose to amend, the punishment of his only Son, full of

divine perfections. — The death of God became necessary to reclaim the human kind from the slavery of Satan, who without that would not have quitted his prey, and who has been found sufficiently powerful against the Omnipotent to oblige him to sacrifice his Son. — This is what the priests designate by the name of the mystery of *redemption*.

It is, unquestionably, the briefest way to show the absurdity of these notions, to state them fairly as the priests deliver them to us. It is evident, that if there be but one God alone, there could not be three. Yet one may very easily conceive such a trifold Divinity much in the same way as Plato, who has, doubtless, had the advantage of the Christian teachers in this respect, since he fashioned the Deity under three different points of view, namely, all-powerful, all-wise, reasonable, and, in fine, as full of goodness; but in the excess of his zeal for these perfections, Plato, who personified these three divine qualities, either himself transformed them into three real beings, or, at least, furnished the Christians with the means of their composition. It is not a difficult task to suppose, that those moral attributes may be found in one and the same God; but it is the height of folly, because such a supposition can be reasonably entertained, to fashion three different Gods; and in vain shall we be able to remedy this metaphysical polytheism by arguments to make of one *three*, and of three *one*. Besides, this reverie never entered the head of the Hebrew Legislator. — The Eternal, it is true, revealed himself to Mo-

ses, but not as a threefold Deity. There is not one syllable in the Old Testament about this Trinity, although a notion so *bizarre*, so marvellous, and so little consonant with our ideas of a divine being, deserved to have been formally announced, especially as it is the foundation and corner-stone of the Christian religion, which was from all eternity an object of the divine solicitude, and on the establishment of which, if we may credit our sapient priests, God seems to have entertained serious thoughts long before the creation of the world.

Nevertheless, the second person, or the second God of the Trinity, is revealed in flesh, the son of God is made man. ; But how could the pure Spirit who presides over the universe beget a son? ; How could this son, who before his incarnation was only a pure spirit, combine that etherial essence with a material body, and envelope himself with it? ; How could the divine nature amalgamate itself with the imperfect nature of man, and how could an immense and infinite being, as the Deity is represented, be formed in the womb of a virgin? ; After what manner could a pure spirit fecundate this favourite virgin? ; Did the Son of God enjoy in the womb of his mother, the faculties of omnipotence, or was he like other children during his infancy, weak, liable to infirmities, sickness, and intellectual imbecility, so conspicuous in the years of childhood; and if so, what, during this period, became of the divine wisdom and power? In fine, ; how could God suffer and die? ; How could a just God consent that a God exempt

from all sin should endure the chastisements which are due to sinners? Why did he not appease himself without immolating a victim so precious and so innocent? What would you think of that sovereign who, in the event of his subjects rebelling against him, should forgive them all, or a select number of them, by putting to death his only and beloved son, who had not rebelled?

— The priests tell us, that it was out of tenderness for the human kind that God wished to accomplish this sacrifice. But I still ask, if it would not have been more simple, more conformable to all our ideas of Deity, for God to pardon the iniquities of the human race, or to have prevented them committing transgressions, by placing them in a condition in which, by their own will, they should never have sinned? According to the entire system of the Christian religion, it is evident, that God did only create the world to have an opportunity of immolating his Son for the rebellious beings he might have formed and preserved immaculate. The fall of the rebellious angels had no visible end to serve but to effect and hasten the fall of Adam. It appears from this system, that God permitted the first man to sin that he might have the pleasure of showing his goodness in sacrificing his “only begotten son” to reclaim men from the thralldom of Satan. — He entrusted to Satan as much power as might enable him to work the ruin of our race, with the view of afterwards changing the projects of the great mass of mankind, by making one God to die, and thereby,

destroy the power of the devil on the earth.—
Now the Son of God died, according to the priests, but the power of Satan, we affirm, remains as great as ever—; How can these things be?—

; Has God succeeded in these projects to the end he proposed? ; Are men entirely rescued from the dominion of Satan? ; Are they not still the slaves of sin? ; Do they find themselves in the happy impossibility of kindling the divine wrath? ; Has the blood of the Son of God washed away the sins of the whole world? ; Do those who are reclaimed, those to whom he has made himself known, those who believe, offend not against heaven? ; Has the Deity, who ought without doubt, to be perfectly satisfied with so memorable a sacrifice, remitted to them the punishment of sin? ; Is it not necessary to do something more for them? And since the death of his son, ; do we find the Christians exempt from disease and from death? Nothing of all this has happened. The measures taken from all eternity by the wisdom and prescience of a God who should find against his plans no obstacles, have been overthrown. The death of God himself has been of no utility to the world. All the divine projects have militated against the free-will of man, but they have not destroyed the power of Satan. Man continues to sin and to die ; the devil keeps possession of the field of battle : and it is for a very small number of the elect that the Deity consented to die.

You do indeed smile, Madam, at my being obliged seriously to combat such chimeras. If

they have something of the marvellous in them it is quite adapted to the heads of children, not of men, and ought not to be admitted by reasonable beings. All the notions we can form of those things must be mysterious ; yet there is no subject more demonstrable according to those whose interest it is to have it believed, though they are as incapable as ourselves to comprehend the matter. — For the priests to say that they believe such absurdities, is to be guilty of manifest falsehood ; because a proposition to be believed must necessarily be understood. To believe what they do not comprehend, is to adhere sottishly to the absurdities of others ; to believe things which are not comprehended by those who gossip about them, is the height of folly ; to believe blindly the mysteries of the Christian religion, is to admit contradictions of which they who declare them are not convinced. In fine, is it necessary to abandon one's reason among absurdities, that have been received without examination from ancient priests, who were either the dupes of more knowing men, or themselves the impostors who fabricated the tales in question.

If you ask of me, how men have not long ago been shocked by such absurd and unintelligible reveries ; I shall proceed, in my turn, to explain to you this secret of the church, this mystery of our priests. It is not necessary, in doing this, to pay any attention to those general dispositions of man, especially when he is ignorant and incapable of reasoning. All men are curious, inquisitive ; their curiosity spurs them

on to inquiry, and their imagination busies itself to clothe with mystery, every thing the fancy conjures up as important to happiness. The vulgar mistake even what they have the means of knowing, or, which is the same thing, what they are least practised in, they are dazzled with; they proclaim it, accordingly, marvellous, prodigious, extraordinary; it is a phenomenon. They neither admire, nor respect much what is always visible to their eyes; but whatever strikes their imagination, whatever gives scope to the mind becomes itself the fruitful source of other ideas far more extravagant.—The priests have had the art to prevail on the people to believe in their secret correspondence with the Deity; they have been thence much respected, and in all countries their professed intercourse with an unseen Divinity, has given room for their announcement of things the most marvellous and mysterious.

Besides, the Divinity being a being whose impenetrable essence is veiled from mortal sight, it has been commonly admitted by the ignorant, that what could not be seen by mortal eye must necessarily be divine. Hence *sacred*, *mysterious*, and *divine*, are synonymous terms; and these imposing words have sufficed to place the human race on their knees to adore what seeks not their inflated devotion.

The three mysteries which I have examined are received unanimously by all sects of Christians; but there are others on which the theologians are not agreed. In fine, we see men, who after they have admitted, without repugnance,

a certain number of absurdities, stop all of a sudden in the way, and refuse to admit more. The Christian Protestants are in this case.— They reject, with disdain, the mysteries for which the Church of Rome shows the greatest respect. Seeing, then, that our doctors, the most opposite to those of the Protestant, have adroitly multiplied mysteries, one is naturally led to conclude, they despaired of governing the mind of man, and commanding his purse, if there was any thing in their religion that was clear, intelligible, and natural. More mysterious than the priests of Egypt itself, they have found means to change every thing into mystery; the very movements of the body, usages the most indifferent, ceremonies the most frivolous, have become, in the powerful hands of the priests, sublime and divine mysteries. In the Roman religion all is magic, all is prodigy, all is supernatural. In the decisions of our theologians, the side which they espouse is almost always that which is the most abhorrent to reason, the most calculated to confound and overthrow common sense. In consequence, our priests are by far the most rich, powerful, and considerable. — The continual want which we have of their aid to obtain from Heaven that grace which it is their province to bring down for us, places us in continual dependence on those marvellous men who have received their commission to treat with the Deity, and become the ambassadors between Heaven and us.

Each of our sacraments envelopes a great mystery. They are ceremonies to which the

Divinity, they say, attaches some secret virtue, by unseen views, of which we can form no ideas. In *baptism*, without which no man can be saved, the water sprinkled on the head of the child washes his spiritual soul, and carries away the defilement which is a consequence of the sin committed in the person of Adam, who sinned for all men. By the mysterious virtue of this water, and of some words equally unintelligible, the infant finds itself reconciled to God, as his first father had made him guilty without his knowledge and consent. In all this, Madam, you cannot by possibility, comprehend the complication of these mysteries, with which no Christian can dispense, though, assuredly, there is not one believer who knows what the virtue of the marvellous water consists in, which is necessary for his regeneration. Nor can you conceive how the supreme and equitable Governor of the universe could impute faults to those poor little children who have never been guilty of any transgressions, against either the laws of God or the laws of man. Nor can you comprehend how a wise Deity can attach his favour to a futile ceremony, which, without changing the nature of the being who has derived an existence, it neither commenced nor was consulted in, must, if administered in winter, be attended with serious consequences to the health of the child.

In *Confirmation*, a sacrament or ceremony, which, to have any value, ought to be administered by a bishop, the laying of the hands on the head of the young confirmant makes the Holy

Spirit descend upon him, and procures the grace of God to uphold him in the faith. You see, Madam, that the efficacy of this sacrament is unfortunately lost in my person ; for, although in my youth I had been duly confirmed, I have not been preserved against smiling at this faith, nor have I been kept invulnerable in the credence of my priests and forefathers.

In the sacrament of *Penitence*, or confession, a ceremony which consists in putting a priest in possession of all one's faults, public or private, you will discover mysteries equally marvellous. In favour of this submission, to which every good Christian is necessarily obliged to submit, a priest, *himself a sinner*, charged with full powers by the Deity, pardons and remits in His name the sins against which God is enraged.—God reconciles himself with every man who humbles himself before the priest, and by means of this ambassador, the unfortunate sinner scales the battlements of heaven again, from which his crimes had excluded him. If this sacrament doth not always procure grace, very distinguishing to those who use it, it has, at all events, the advantage of rendering them pliable to the clergy, who, by its means, find an easy sway in their spiritual empire over the human mind, an empire that enables them, not unfrequently, to disturb society, and more often the repose of families, and the very conscience of the person confessing.

There is among the Catholics another sacrament, which contains the most strange mysteries. It is that of the *Eucharist*. Our teach-

ers, under pain of being damned, enjoin us to believe that the Son of God is compelled by a priest to quit the abodes of glory, and to come and masque himself under the appearance of bread ! This bread becomes forthwith the body of God—this God multiplies himself in all places, and at all times, when and where the priests, scattered over the face of the earth, find it necessary to command his presence in the shape of bread—yet we see only one and the same God, who receives the homage and adoration of all those good people, who find it very ridiculous in the Egyptians to adore lupins and onions. But the Catholics are not simply content with worshipping a bit of bread, which they consider by the conjurations of a priest as divine ; they eat this bread, and then persuade themselves that they are nourished by the body, or substance of God himself. The Protestants, it is true, do not admit a mystery so very odd ; and regard those who do, as real idolaters. ; What then ? This marvellous dogma is, without doubt, of the greatest utility to the priests. — In the eyes of those who admit it, they become very important gentlemen, who have the power of disposing of the Deity, whom they make to descend between their hands ; j and thus, a Catholic priest is, in fact, the creator of his God !

There is also *Extreme Unction*, a sacrament which consists in anointing with oil those sick persons who are about to depart into the other world, and which not only soothes their bodily pains, but also takes away the sins of their souls. If it produces these good effects, it is an invisi-

ble and mysterious method of manifesting obvious results; for we frequently behold sick persons have their fears of death allayed, though the operation may but too often accelerate their dissolution. But our priests are so full of charity, and they interest themselves so greatly in the salvation of souls, that they like rather to risk their own health beside the sick-bed of persons afflicted with the most contagious diseases, than lose the opportunity of administering their salutary ointment.

Ordination, is another very mysterious ceremony, by which the Deity secretly bestows his invisible grace on those whom he has selected to fill the office of the holy priesthood. According to the Catholic religion God gives to the priests the power of making God himself, as we have shown above, a privilege which without doubt cannot be sufficiently admired. With respect to the sensible effects of this sacrament, and of the visible grace which it confers, they are enabled by the help of some words and certain ceremonies, to change a profane man into one that is sacred; that is to say, who is not profane any longer. — By this spiritual *métamorphosis*, this man becomes capable of enjoying considerable revenues without being obliged to do any thing useful for society. — On the contrary, heaven itself confers on him the right of deceiving, of annoying, and of pillaging the profane citizens, who labour for his ease and luxury.

Finally, *marriage* is a sacrament that confers on the pair thus yoked, mysterious and invisible grace, of which you and I, Eugenia, have yet to

acquire precise ideas. Protestants and infidels, who look upon marriage as a civil contract, and not as a sacrament, receive neither more nor less of its visible grace than the good Catholics. The former see not that those who are married enjoy by this sacrament any secret virtue, whence they may become more constant and faithful to the engagements they have contracted. And I believe both you and I, Madam, have heard of Catholics who, after marriage, have detested each other as cordially as any Protestants or infidels, ever detested their wives.

I will not now enter upon the consideration of a multitude of other magic ceremonies, admitted by some Christian sectaries and rejected by others, but to which the devout, who embrace them, attach the most lofty ideas, in the firm persuasion, that God will, on that account, visit them with his invisible grace. All these ceremonies, doubtless contain great mysteries, and the method of handling or speaking of them is exceedingly mysterious. It is thus that the water on which a priest has pronounced a few words, contained in his conjuring book, acquires the invisible virtue of chasing away wicked spirits, who are invisible to our organs of sight, smell, and touch. It is thus that the oil, on which a bishop has muttered some certain formula, becomes capable of communicating to men, and even to some inanimate substances, such as wood, stone, metals, and walls, those invisible virtues which they did not previously possess. In fine, in all the ceremonies of the church, we discover mysteries, and the vulgar,

who comprehend nothing of them, are not the less disposed to admire, to be fascinated with, and to respect with a blind devotion. But soon would they cease to have this veneration for these fooleries, if they comprehended the design and end the priests have in view by enforcing their observance.

The priests of all nations have begun by being charlatans, castle-builders, divines, and sorcerers. We find men of these characters in nations the most ignorant and savage, where they live by the ignorance and credulity of others. They are regarded by their ignorant countrymen as superior beings endowed with supernatural gifts, favourites of the very Gods, because the uninquiring multitude see them perform things which they take to be mighty marvellous, or which the ignorant have always considered marvellous. In nations the most polished, the people are always the same; persons the most sensible are not often of the same ideas, especially on the subject of religion; and the priests, authorised by the ancient folly of the multitude, continue their old tricks, and receive universal applause.—You are not, then, to be surprised, Madam, if you still behold our pontiffs and our priests exercise their magical rites, or rear castles before the eyes of people prejudiced in favour of their ancient illusions, and who attach to these mysteries a degree of consequence, seeing they are not in a condition to comprehend the motives of the fabricators. Every thing that is mysterious has charms for the ignorant; the marvellous captivates all men;

persons the most enlightened find it difficult to defend themselves against these illusions. Hence you may discover that the priests are always opinionatively attached to these rites and ceremonies of their worship; and it has never been without some violent revolution that they have been diminished or abrogated. — The annihilation of a trifling ceremony has often caused rivers of blood to flow. The people have believed themselves lost and undone when one bolder than the rest wished to innovate in matters of religion; they have fancied that they were to be deprived of inestimable advantages and invisible but saving grace, which they have supposed to be attached by the Divinity himself to some movements of the body. Priests the most adroit have overcharged religion with ceremonies, and practices, and mysteries. — They fancied that all these were so many cords to bind the people to their interest, to allure them by enthusiasm, and render them necessary to their idle and luxurious existence, which is not spent without much money extracted from the hard earnings of the people, and much of that respect which is but the homage of slaves to spiritual tyrants.

You cannot any longer, I persuade myself Madam, be made the dupe of these holy jugglers, who impose on the vulgar by their marvellous tales. You must now be convinced, that the things which I have touched upon as mysteries are profound absurdities, of which their inventors can render no reasonable account either to themselves or to others. You must now be

certified, that the movements of the body, so much observed in the Catholic worship, as for example, the crossing of one's self, are ceremonies perfectly indifferent in themselves, and in which a Deity, wise and good, sees neither reverence nor worship. You must be sensible now, that a reasonable Deity cannot be flattered by such puerile ceremonies, and that the omnipotent Sovereign of all nature is exempt from such wants as the ministers of religion ascribe to him, for all our devotions suppose in him some exigency or want; that this Being, exempt from pride and vanity, is not like the princes of this earth, who exact etiquette from their subjects; that He attaches neither duty nor favour to vain ceremonies, disapproved of by reason, and repugnant to common sense.— You conclude, then, that all these marvellous rites, in which our priests announce so much mystery, and in which the people are taught to consider the whole of religion as consisting, are nothing more than puerilities, to which people of understanding ought never to submit. That they are usages calculated principally to alarm the minds of the weak, and keep in bondage those who have not the courage to throw off the yoke of priests.

I am, &c,

LETTER VII.

You now know, Madam, what you ought to attach to the mysteries and ceremonies of that religion you propose to meditate on, and adore in silence. I proceed now to examine some of those practices to which the priests tell us the Deity attaches his complaisance and his favours. In consequence of the false, sinister, contradictory, and incompatible ideas, which all revealed religions give us of the Deity, the priests have invented a crowd of unreasonable usages, but which are conformable to these erroneous notions that they have framed of this Being. God is always regarded as a man full of passion, sensible to presents, to flatteries, and marks of submission; or rather as a fantastic and punctilious sovereign, who is very seriously angry when we neglect to show him that respect and obeisance, which the vanity of earthly potentates exacts from their vassals.

It is after these notions so little agreeable to the Deity, that the priests have conjured up a crowd of practices and strange inventions, ridiculous, inconvenient, and often cruel; but by which they inform us we shall merit the good favour of God, or disarm the wrath of the Universal Lord. With some all consists in prayers, offerings, and sacrifices, with which they fancy God is well pleased. They forget that a God who is good, who knows all things, has no need to be solicited; that a God who is the author of

all things has no need to be presented with any part of his workmanship; that a God who knows his power, has no need of either flatteries or submissions, to remind him of his grandeur, his power or his rights; that a God who is Lord of all, has no need of offerings which belong to himself; that a God who has no need of any thing from any created being, cannot be won by presents nor allured by the attempts of his creatures with the goods of this life, which they have received from the Divine bounty.

One is compelled to make these simple reflections, since all the religions in the world are filled with an infinite number of frivolous practices, by which men have long strove to render themselves acceptable to the Deity. The priests who are always declared to be the ministers, the favourites, the interpreters of God's will, have discovered how they might most easily profit by the errors of mankind, and the presents which they offer to the Deity. They are thence interested to enter into the false ideas of the people, and even to redouble the darkness of their mind. They have invented the means of pacifying a powerful unknown Being who disposes of their fate; of exciting the devotion of the people, and their zeal for invisible beings, which they themselves have rendered visible. These priests have discovered that in labouring for the Gods they have heaped up wealth for themselves. They have taken of the presents, sacrifices, and offerings of the Gods, in order to procure for the devout, the blessings they would not be worthy of, did they not evince and practice this liberality.

— You thus perceive, Madam, how the priests have made common cause with the Divinity. Their policy thence obliged them to favour and increase the errors of the human kind. They talk of this ineffable Being as of an interested monarch, jealous, full of vanity, who gives that it may be restored to him again; who exacts continual signs of submission and respect; who desires without ceasing, that men may reiterate their marks of respect for him; who wishes to be solicited, who bestows no grace unless it be importuned; in fine, who is ever disposed to be appeased and won by gifts of which his ministers receive the greatest share.

It is evident that it is on ideas that have been borrowed from the beings, and the practices that surround us, from sovereigns and their courts, that the priests have founded all their practices, their ceremonies and their rites which we behold current in all religions established in the world. Each sect has gone on to make its God the greatest, the most awful, the most despotic, the most interested. The people acquainted simply with human opinions, and full of debasement, have adopted without examination, the inventions which the Deity have shown them as the fittest to obtain his favour, and soften his wrath. — The priests fail not to adapt these practices, which they have invented, to their own system of religion, and personal interest; and the ignorant and vulgar have allowed themselves to be blindly led by these guides. Habit has familiarized them with things reason would never otherwise submit to, and they go

through the routine of their duties from generation to generation, from father to son, without questioning the imposture.

The infant as soon as it can be made to understand any thing, is taught mechanically to join its little hands in prayer. His tongue is forced to lisp a formula which it does not comprehend, addressed to a God which its understanding can never conceive. In the arms of its nurse it is carried into the temple, or church, where its eyes are habituated to contemplate spectacles, ceremonies, and pretended mysteries, of which even when it shall have arrived at old age, it will understand no more than it does now. If any one asks the good nurse ; why she takes the child thither? Or the parents ; why they send it to church? Both she and they, candidly tell you they do so out of reverence for sacred things, and that the child may become early acquainted with its duties to its God ; yet these duties are unintelligible to themselves. Should you attempt to undeceive them in regard to these recurring futilities, either they will not listen to you, or they will fly into a passion, and ask if you are going to sweep away the hope of the helpless, and expose the world to rapine and murder, rebellion and crime. These are their arguments. All men who strenuously fortify themselves in their good sense, and reason against these continual contradictions, appear ridiculous or insensible to the wise Christian, or they are reprobated by him as impious and blasphemous ; for it is by this coarse appellation he designates the men who tread not the same

routine with himself, and who attach not their faith to notions that will not bear the scrutiny of reason.

What horror does it not fill the Christian devotee with if you tell him that his priest is unnecessary? What would be his surprise if you were to prove to him, even on the principles of his religion, that the prayers which in his infancy he had been taught to consider as the most agreeable to his God, are unworthy and unnecessary to this Deity! For if God knows all, what need is there to remind him of the wants of his creatures whom he loves? If God is a father full of tenderness and goodness, is it necessary to ask him to "give us day by day our daily bread?" If this God, so good, foresaw the wants of his children, and knew much better than they what they could not know of themselves, whence is it he bids them importune him to grant them their requests? If this God is immutable and wise, how can his creatures change the fixed resolution of the Deity? If this God is just and good, how can he injure us, or place us in a situation to require the use of that prayer which entreats the Deity *not to lead us into temptation*.

You see by this, Madam, that there is but a very small portion of what the Christians pretend they understand and consider absolutely necessary, that accords at all with what they tell us has been dictated by God himself. You see that the Lord's Prayer itself, contains many absurdities and ideas, totally contrary to those which every Christian ought to have of his God. If you ask a Christian why he repeats without

ceasing this vain formula on which he never reflects, he can assign little other reason, than that he was taught in his infancy to clasp his hands, repeat words, the meaning of which his priest, not himself, is alone bound to understand. He may probably add, that he has ever been taught to consider this formula requisite, as it was the most sacred and the most proper to merit the favour of Heaven.

We should, without doubt, form the same judgment of many other prayers which our teachers recommend to us daily. And if we believe them, man, to please God, ought to pass a large portion of his existence in supplicating Heaven to pour down its blessings on him. But if God is good, if he cherishes his creatures, if he knows their wants, it seems superfluous to pray to him. If God changes not, he has never promised to alter his secret decrees, or, if he has, he is variable in his fancies, like man: *;* to what purpose are all our petitions to him? *;* If God is offended with us, will he not reject prayers which insult his goodness, his justice, and infinite wisdom?

; What motives, then, have our priests to inculcate constantly the necessity of prayer? - It is, that they may thereby hold the minds of mankind in opinions more advantageous to themselves. They represent God to us under the traits of a monarch difficult of access, who cannot be easily pacified, but of whom they are the ministers, the favourites, and servants. They become intercessors between this invisible Sovereign and his subjects of this nether world.

They sell to the ignorant, their intercession with the All-powerful; they pray for the people, and by society they are recompensed with real advantages, with riches, honours, and ease. - It is on the necessity of prayer that our priests, our monks, and all religious men establish their lazy existence; that they profess to win a place in heaven for their followers and paymasters, who, without this intercession, could neither obtain the favour of God, nor avert his chastisements and the calamities the world is so often visited with. - The prayers of the priests are regarded as a universal remedy for all evils. All the misfortunes of nations are laid before these spiritual guides, who find public calamities a source of profit to themselves, as it is then they are amply paid for their supposed mediation between the Deity and his suffering creatures. They never teach the people that these things spring from the course of nature and of laws they cannot controul. ; Oh! no. They make the world believe they are the judgments of an angry God. The evils for which they can find no remedy are pronounced marks of the divine wrath, they are supernatural, and the priests must be applied to. God, whom they call so good, appears sometimes obstinately deaf to their entreaties. Their common Parent, so tender, appears to derange the order of nature to manifest his anger. The God who is so just, sometimes punishes men who cannot divine the cause of his vengeance. Then, in their distress they flee to the priests, who never fail to find motives for the divine wrath. They tell them, that God has been of-

fended; that he has been neglected; that he requires prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. They pretend, also, that he is appeased when his ministers supplicate him. Without this intercession, they announce to the vulgar, that their harvests will fail; that their fields will be inundated; that pestilence, famine, war, and contagion will visit the earth; and when these misfortunes have arrived, they declare they may be removed by means of prayers.

Should fear and terrour, allow the poor to reason, they will discover that all the evils they are afflicted with, as well as the good things of this life they have enjoyed, are necessary consequences of the order of nature. They will easily discover that a wise God, immutable in his conduct, cannot allow any thing to transpire but according to those laws of which he is the author. They will discover that the calamities, sterility, maladies, contagions, and even death itself are effects as necessary as happiness, abundance, health, and life itself. They will find that wars, wants, and famine, are often the effects of human imprudence. We must submit to accidents which we cannot prevent, and we must bear up under those we could not foresee, with the same equanimity we would share good fortune that we had anticipated. Opinions that are unsophisticated and accordant to nature, stand in no need of such remedies as are not within our reach. If they are above that, in vain shall we strive by an age of prayer to surmount them. — Experience proves that men profit by exertion, manual or mental, rather than

by the illusions of priestcraft, and the adoration of incomprehensible mummeries. ; Would that all men were stripped of their religious prejudices, to see the question in this light!

Nor ought we to set value on the prayers of our priests, from this consideration. We discover the inefficacy of their prayers, and the futility of their practices, from the little effect which all these have on their own conduct; yet these are the men who put the human race on their knees. They compel their votaries always to run down those who discredit their pretensions. They terrify the weak minded by frightful ideas which they hold out to them of the Deity. They forbid them to reason; they make them deaf to reason, by conforming them to ordinances the most out of the way, the most unreasonable, and the most contradictory to the very principles on which they pretend to establish them. They change practices, arbitrary in themselves, or, at most, indifferent and useless, into important duties, which they proclaim the most essential of all duties, and the most sacred and moral. They know that man ceases to reason in proportion as he suffers, or is wretched. Hence, if he experiences real misfortunes, the priests make sure of him; if he is not unfortunate they menace him; they create imaginary fears and troubles.

In fine, Madam, when you wish to examine with your own eyes, and not by the help of the pretensions set up and imposed on you by the ministers of religion, you will be compelled to acknowledge the things we have been considering,

as useful to the priests alone, they are useless to the Deity, and to society they are often very obviously pernicious. Of what utility can it be in any family, to behold an excess of devotion in the mother of that family. One would suppose it is not necessary for a lady to pass all her time in prayers, and in meditations, to the neglect of other duties. - Much less is it the part of a Catholic mother to be closetted in mystic conversation with her priest. ; Will her husband, her children, and her friends, applaud her who loses most of her time in prayers and meditations, and practices, which can tend only to render her sour, unhappy, and discontented? ; Would it not be much better, that a father, or a mother of a family, should be occupied with what belonged to their domestic affairs, than to spend their time in masses, in hearing sermons, in meditating on mysterious and unintelligible dogmas, or, boasting about exercises of piety that tend to nothing?

Madam, ; do you not find, in the country you inhabit, a great many devotees who are sunk in debt, whose fortune is squandered away on priests, and who are incapable of retrieving it? Content to put their conscience to rights on religious matters, they neither trouble themselves about the education of their children, nor the arrangement of their fortune, nor the discharge of their debts. - Such men as would be thrown into despair did they omit one mass, will consent to leave their creditors without their money, ruined by their negligence as much as by their principles. In truth, Madam, on what

side soever you survey this religion, you will not find it good for much.

¿ What shall we say of those fêtes which are so multiplied amongst us? ¿ Are they not evidently pernicious to society? ¿ Are not all days the same to the Eternal? ¿ Are there *gala* days in heaven? ¿ Can God be honoured by the business of an artisan or a merchant, who, in place of earning bread on which his family may subsist, squanders away his time in the church, and afterwards goes to spend his money in the public-house? It is necessary, the priests will tell you, for man to have repose. But ¿ will he not seek repose when he is fatigued by the labour of his hands? ¿ Is it not more necessary that every man should labour in his vocation than go to a temple to chant over a service which benefits only the priests, or hear a sermon of which he can understand nothing? ¿ And do not such as find great scruple in doing a necessary labour on Sunday, frequently sit down and get drunk on that day, consuming in a few hours the receipts of their week's labour? — But it is for the interest of the clergy that all other shops should be shut when theirs are open. We may thence easily discover why fêtes are necessary.

¿ Is it not contrary to all the notions which we can form of the goodness and wisdom of the Divinity, that religion should form into duties both abstinence and privations; or that penitences and austerities, should be the sole proofs of virtue? ¿ What should be said of a father who should place his children at a table loaded with the fruits of the earth, but who, nevertheless,

— should debar them from touching certain of them, though both nature and reason, dictated their use and nutriment? ; Can we then suppose, that a Deity wise and good, interdicts to his creatures the enjoyment of innocent pleasures which may contribute to render life agreeable, or, that a God, who has created all things, every object the most desirable to the nourishment and health of man, should nevertheless forbid him their use? The Christian religion appears to doom its votaries to the punishment of Tantalus. The most part of the superstitions in the world have made of God a capricious and jealous sovereign, who amuses himself by tempting the passions and exciting the desires of his slaves, without permitting them the gratification of the one, or the enjoyment of the other. We see among all sects the portraiture of a chagrined Deity, the enemy of innocent amusements, and offended at the well being of his creatures. We see in all countries many men so foolish as to imagine they will merit heaven by fighting against their nature, refusing the goods of fortune, and tormenting themselves under an idea that they will thereby render themselves agreeable to God. Especially do they believe that they will by these means disarm the fury of God, prevent the inflictions of his chastisements, if they sacrifice to the whims of priests the enjoyment of those pleasures which are the natural inheritance of the human race.

— We find these atrocious, fanatical, and senseless ideas in the Christian religion, which supposes its God as cruel to exact sufferings from men,

as death from his only Son. If a God, exempt from all sin, is himself also the sufferer for the sins of all, which is the doctrine of those who maintain universal redemption, it is not surprising to see men that are sinners making it a duty to assemble in large meetings, and invent the means of rendering themselves miserable.

These gloomy notions have banished men to the desert. They have fanatically renounced society and the pleasures of life, to be buried alive, believing they would merit heaven if they afflicted themselves with stripes, and passed their existence in mumrical ceremonies, as injurious to their health as useless to their country. And these are the false ideas by which the divinity is transformed into a tyrant as barbarous as insensible, who, agreeably to *priestcraft*, has prescribed how both men and women might live in ennui, penitence, sorrow, and tears ; for the perfection of monastic institutions consists in the ingenious art of self-torture. — But sacerdotal pride finds its account in these austerities. Rigid monks glory in barbarous rules, the observance of which attracts the respect of the credulous, who imagine that men who torment themselves, are, indeed, the favourites of heaven. But these monks, who follow these austere rules, are fanatics, who sacrifice themselves to the pride of the clergy who live in luxury and in wealth, although their duped, imbecile brethren have been known to make it a point of honour to die of famine.

How often, Madam, has your attention not been roused when you recalled to mind the fate

of the poor religious men of the desert, whom an unnecessary vow has condemned, as it were voluntarily, to a life as rigorous as if spent in a prison ! 'Seduced by the enthusiasm of youth, or forced by the orders of inhuman parents, they have been obliged to carry to the tomb the chains of their captivity. 'They have been obliged to submit without appeal to a stern superior, who finds no consolation in the discharge of his slavish task, but in making his empire more hard to those beneath him. — You have seen unfortunate young ladies obliged to renounce their rank in society, the innocent pleasures of youth, the joys of their sex, to groan for ever under a rigorous despotism to which indiscreet vows had bound them. 'All monasteries present to us an odious group of fanatics, who have separated themselves from society to pass the remainder of their lives in unhappiness. The society of these devotees is calculated solely to render their lives mutually more unsupportable. But it seems strange that men should expect to merit heaven by suffering the torments of hell on earth ; yet so it is, and reason has too often proved insufficient to convince them of the contrary.

If this religion does not call all Christians to these sublime perfections, it nevertheless enjoins on all its votaries, suffering, and mortifying of the body. The church prescribe privations to all her children, and abstinence especially to the young ; these things they practice amongst us as duties ; and the devotees imagine they render themselves very agreeable to the Divinity when they have scrupulously fulfilled those im-

nute and puerile practices, by which they tell us that the priests have proof whether their patience and obedience be such as are dictated by, and acceptable to Heaven.

What a ridiculous idea is it, for example, to make of the Deity, a trio of persons; to teach the faithful that this Deity takes notice of what kinds of food his people eat; that he is displeased if they eat beef or mutton; but that he is delighted if they eat beans and fish! In good sooth, Madam, our priests, who sometimes gives us very lofty ideas of God, please themselves but too often with vilely misrepresenting the Sovereign of the universe.

The life of a good Christian, or of a devotee, is crowded with a host of useless practices, which would be, at least, pardonable if they procured any good for society.—But it is not for that purpose that our priests make so much to do about them; they only wish to have submissive slaves, sufficiently blind to respect their caprices, as the orders of a wise God; sufficiently stupid to regard all their practices as divine duties, and they who scrupulously observe them as the real favourites of the Omnipotent. What good can there result to the world from the abstinence of meats, so much enjoined on some Christians, especially when other Christians judge this injunction a very ridiculous law, and contrary to reason and the order of things established in nature? It is not difficult to perceive amongst us, that this injunction, openly violated by the rich, is an oppression on the poor, who are compelled to pay dearly for an indifferent, often

an unwholesome diet, that injures rather than repairs the natural strength of their constitution. Besides, do not the priests sell this permission to the rich, to transgress an injunction the poor must not violate with impunity? In fine, they seem to have multiplied our practices, our duties, and our tortures, to have the advantage of multiplying our faults, and thus strip us of a large portion of the harmless delights which nature bids us innocently enjoy.

The more we examine religion, the more reason shall we have to be convinced that it is beneficial to the *priests alone*. Every part of this religion conspires to render us submissive to the fantasies of our spiritual guides, to labour for their grandeur, to contribute to their riches. They appoint us to perform disadvantageous duties; they prescribe impossible perfections, purposely that we may transgress; they have thereby engendered in pious minds, scruples and difficulties which they condescendingly appease for money. A devotee is obliged to observe without ceasing the useless and frivolous rules of his priest, and even then he is subject to continual reproaches, he is perpetually in want of his priest to expiate his pretended faults with which he charges himself, and the omission of duties that he regards as the most important acts of his life, but which are rarely such as interest society or benefit it by their performance. By a train of religious prejudices with which the priests infect the mind of their weak devotees, these believe themselves infinitely more capable when they have omitted some useless practice, than if

they had committed some great injustice or atrocious sin against humanity. It is commonly sufficient for the devotees to be on good terms with God, whether they be consistent in their actions with man, or in the practice of those duties they owe to society. But they who have set up a Divinity of their own making, can, of course, balance their conscience to the attributes of their God, though they may find them somewhat stubborn in bending to the rules of human conduct established among men by the experience of ages and their mutual dependance.

Besides, Madam, *i* what real advantage does society derive from repeated prayers, abstinences, privations, seclusions, meditations, and austerities, to which religion attaches so much value? *-i* Do all the mysterious practices of the priests produce any real good? *-i* Are they capable of calming the passions, of correcting vices, and of giving virtue to those who most scrupulously observe them? *i* Do we not daily see persons who believe themselves damned if they forget a mass, if they eat a fowl on Friday, if they neglect a confession, though they are guilty at the same time of great direliction to society? *i* Do they not hold the conduct of those very unjust, and very cruel, who happen to have the misfortune of not thinking and doing as they think and act? These practices, out of which a great number of men have created essential duties, but too commonly absorb all moral duties; for if the devotees are over religious, it is rare to find them virtuously nice. Content with doing what religion requires, they trouble them-

selves very little about other matters. They believe themselves the favoured of God, and that it is a proof of this if they are detested by men, whose good opinion they are seldom anxious to deserve. The whole life of a devotee is spent in fulfilling with scrupulous exactitude duties indifferent to God, unnecessary to himself and useless to others. He fancies he is virtuous when he has performed the rites which his religion prescribes; when he has meditated on mysteries of which he understands nothing; when he has struggled with sadness to do things in which a man of sense can perceive no advantage; in fine, when he has endeavoured to practice as much as in him lies, the Evangelical, or Christian virtues, in which he thinks all morality essentially consists.

I shall proceed in my next letter to examine these virtues, and to prove to you that they are contrary to the ideas we ought to form of God, useless to ourselves, and often dangerous to others. In the mean time,

I am &c.

LETTER VIII.

If we believe the priests, we shall be persuaded, that the Christian religion, by the beauty of its morals, excels philosophy and all the other religious systems in the world. According to them the unassisted reason of the human mind could never have conceived sounder doctrines of mo-

rality, more heroical virtues, or precepts more beneficial to society. But this is not all; the virtues known or practised, among the heathens are considered as *false virtues*; far from deserving our esteem, and the favour of the Almighty, they are entitled to nothing but contempt, and, indeed, are *flagrant sins* in the sight of God. In short, the priests labour to convince us, that the Christian ethics are purely divine, and the lessons incalculated so sublime, that they could proceed from nothing less than the Deity.

If, indeed, we call that Divine which men can neither conceive nor perform; if by divine virtues we are to understand virtues to which the mind of man cannot possibly attach the least idea of utility; if by divine perfections are meant those qualities which are not only foreign to the nature of man, but which are irreconcilably repugnant to it—then, indeed, we shall be compelled to acknowledge that the morals of Christianity are divine, at least we shall be assured that they have nothing in common with that system of morality which arises out of the nature and relations of men, but on the contrary, that they, in many instances, confound the best conceptions we are able to form of virtue.

Guided by the light of reason, we comprehend under the name of virtue, those habitual dispositions of the heart which tend to the happiness, and the real advantage of those with whom we associate, and by the exercise of which our fellow-creatures are induced to feel a reciprocal interest in our welfare. Under the Christian system the name of virtues is bestowed upon dis-

positions which it is impossible to possess without supernatural grace, and which, when possessed, are useless if not injurious, both to ourselves and others. The morality of Christians is, in good truth, the morality of another world. Like the philosopher of antiquity, they keep their eyes fixed upon the stars till they fall into a well, unperceived, at their feet. The only object which their scheme of morals proposes to itself is, to disgust their minds with the things of this world, in order that they may place their entire affections upon things above, of which they have no knowledge whatever; their happiness here below, forms no part of their consideration; this life, in the view of a Christian, is nothing but a pilgrimage; leading to another existence, infinitely more interesting to his hopes, because infinitely beyond the reach of his understanding. Besides, before we can deserve to be happy in the world which we do not know, we are informed that we must be miserable in the world which we do know; and, above all things, in order to secure to ourselves happiness hereafter, it is especially necessary that we altogether resign the use of our own reason; that is to say, we must seal up our eyes in utter darkness, and surrender ourselves to the guidance of our priests. These are the principles upon which the fabric of Christian morals is evidently constructed.

Let us now proceed, Madam, to a more detailed examination of the virtues upon which the Christian religion is built—these virtues are Evangelical, &c., if destitute of them, we are assured that it is in vain for us to seek the favour of the Deity.

Of these virtues the first is FAITH. According to the doctrine of the church, faith is the gift of God, a supernatural virtue, by means of which we are inspired with a firm belief in God, and in all that he has vouchsafed to reveal to man, although our reason is utterly unable to comprehend it. Faith is, says the church, founded upon the word of God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Thus faith supposes, that God has spoken to man—; but what evidence have we that God has spoken to man? The holy Scriptures. ; Who is it that assures us the Holy Scriptures contains the word of God? It is the church. But ; who is it that assures us the church cannot and will not deceive us? The Holy Scriptures. — Thus the Scriptures bear witness to the infallibility of the church—and the church, in return, testifies the truth of the Scriptures. — From this statement of the case, you must perceive, that faith is nothing more than an implicit belief in the priests whose assurances we adopt as the foundation of opinions in themselves incomprehensible. It is true, that as a confirmation of the truth of Scripture, we are referred to miracles—but it is these identical Scriptures which report to us and testify those very miracles. Of the absolute impossibility of any miracles, I flatter myself that I have already convinced you.

Besides, I cannot but think, Madam, that you must be, by this time, thoroughly satisfied how absurd it is to say that the understanding is convinced of any thing which it does not comprehend; the insight I have given you into the

books which the Christians call sacred, must have left upon your mind a firm persuasion, that they never could have proceeded from a wise, a good, an omniscient, a just, and all-powerful God. If, then, we cannot yield them a real belief, what we call faith can be nothing more than a blind and irrational adherence to a system devised by priests, whose crafty selfishness has made them careful from the earliest infancy to fill our tender minds with prepossessions in favour of their doctrines. Interested, however, as they are in the opinions which they endeavour to force upon us as truth, is it possible for these priests to believe them themselves? Unquestionably not—the thing is out of nature. They are men like ourselves, furnished with the same faculties, and neither they nor we can be convinced of any thing which lies equally beyond the scope of us all. If they possessed an additional sense, we should perhaps allow that they might comprehend what is unintelligible to us; but as we clearly see that they have no intellectual privileges above the rest of the species, we are compelled to conclude, that their faith, like the faith of others, is a blind acquiescence in opinions derived, without examination, from their predecessors; and that they must be hypocrites when they pretend to *believe* in doctrines of the truth of which they cannot be *convinced*, since these doctrines have been shown to be destitute of that degree of evidence which is necessary to impress the mind with a feeling of their probability, much less of their certainty.

It will be said that faith, or the faculty of be-

believing things incredible, is the gift of God, and can only be known to those upon whom God has bestowed the favour. My answer is that, if that be the case, we have no alternative but to wait till the grace of God shall be shed upon us—and that in the mean time we may be allowed to doubt whether credulity, stupidity, and the perversion of reason can proceed, as favours, from a rational Deity who has endowed us with the power of thinking.—If God be infinitely wise, how can folly and imbecility be pleasing to him? If there were such a thing as faith, proceeding from grace, it would be the privilege of seeing things otherwise than as God has made them; and if that were so, it follows, that the whole creation would be a mere cheat.

! No man can believe the Bible to be the production of God without doing violence to every consistent notion that he is able to form of Deity!

! No man can believe that one God is three Gods, and that those three Gods are one God, without renouncing all pretension to common sense, and persuading himself that there is no such thing as certainty in mathematics!

Thus, Madam, we are bound to suspect that what the church calls a gift from above, a supernatural grace, is, in fact, a perfect blindness, an irrational credulity, a brutish submission, a vague uncertainty, a stupid ignorance, by which we are led to acquiesce, without investigation, in every dogma that our priests think fit to impose upon us—by which we are led to adopt, without knowing why, the pretended opinions of men who can have no better means of arriving at

the truth than we have. In short, we are authorized in suspecting that no motive but that of blinding us, in order more effectually to deceive us, can actuate those men who are eternally preaching to us about a virtue which, if it could exist, would throw into utter confusion the simplest and clearest perceptions of the human mind.

This supposition is amply confirmed by the conduct of our ecclesiastics—forgetting what they have told us, that grace is the gratuitous present of God, bestowed or withheld at his sovereign pleasure, they nevertheless indulge their wrath against all those who have not received the gift of faith; they keep up one incessant anathema against all unbelievers, and nothing less than absolute extermination of heresy can appease their anger wherever they have the strength to accomplish it. So that heretics and unbelievers are made accountable for the grace of God, although they never received it; they are punished in this world for those advantages which God has not been pleased to extend to them in their journey to the next. In the estimation of priests and devotees, the want of faith is the most unpardonable of all offences—it is precisely that offence which, in the cruelty of their absurd injustice, they visit with the last rigours of punishment, for you cannot be ignorant, Madam, that in all countries where the clergy possess sufficient influence, the flames of priestly Charity are lighted up to consume all those who are deficient in the prescribed allowance of faith.

When we inquire the motive for their unjust and senseless preceedings, we are told that faith is the most necessary of all things, that faith is of the most essential service to morals, that without faith a man is a dangerous and wicked wretch, a pest to Society. And, after all, is it our own choice to have faith? Can we believe just what we please? Does it depend upon ourselves not to think a proposition absurd which our understanding shows us to be absurd? How could we avoid receiving, in our infancy, whatever impressions and opinions our teachers and relations chose to implant in us? And where is the man who can boast that he has faith—that he is fully convinced of mysteries which he cannot conceive, and wonders which he cannot comprehend?

Under these circumstances; how can faith be serviceable to morals? If no one can have faith but upon the assurance of another, and consequently cannot entertain a real conviction, what becomes of the social virtues? Admitting that faith were possible, what connection can exist between such occult speculations and the manifest duties of mankind, duties which are palpable to every one who, in the least, consults his reason, his interest or the welfare of the society to which he belongs. Before I can be satisfied of the advantages of justice, temperance, and benevolence, must I first believe in the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and all the fables of the Old Testament? If I believe in all the atrocious murders attributed by the Bible to that God whom I am bound to con-

sider as the fountain of justice, wisdom, and goodness, is it not likely that I shall feel encouraged to the commission of crimes when I find them sanctioned by such an example? Although unable to discover the value of so many mysteries which I cannot understand, or of so many fanciful and cumbersome ceremonies prescribed by the church, I am I, on that account, to be denounced as a more dangerous citizen than those who persecute, torment, and destroy every one of their fellow-creatures who does not think and act at their dictation? The evident result of all these considerations, must be, that he who has a lively faith, and a blind zeal for opinions contradictory to common sense, is more irrational, and consequently more wicked than the man whose mind is untainted by such detestable doctrines; for when once the priests have gained their fatal ascendancy over his mind, and have persuaded him that, by committing all sorts of enormities, he is doing the work of the Lord, there can be no doubt that he will make greater havoc in the happiness of the world, than the man whose reason tells him that such excesses cannot be acceptable in the sight of God.

The advocates of the church will here interrupt me, by alleging that if divested of those sentiments which religion inspires, men would no longer live under the influence of motives strong enough to induce an abstinence from vice, or to urge them on in the career of virtue when obstructed by painful sacrifices. In a word, it will be affirmed that unless men are made to

feel a conviction of rewards and punishments hereafter, they are released from every motive to fulfil their duties to each other in the present life.

You are doubtless, Madam, quite sensible of the futility of such pretences, put forth by priests,—who, in order to render themselves more necessary, are indefatigable in endeavouring to persuade us that their system is indispensable to the maintenance of social order. To annihilate their sophistries it is sufficient to reflect upon the nature of man, his true interests, and the end for which society is formed. Man is a feeble being, whose necessities render him constantly dependent upon the support of others, whether it be for the preservation or the pleasure of his existence ; he has no means of interesting others in his welfare except by his manner of conducting himself towards them ; that conduct which renders him an object of affection to others is called virtue—whatever is pernicious to society is called crime—and where the consequences are injurious only to the individual himself, it is called vice. Thus all men must immediately perceive that they consult their own happiness by advancing that of others—that vices, however cautiously disguised from public observation, are, nevertheless, fraught with ruin to those who practice them—and that crimes are sure to render their perpetrators odious or contemptible in the eyes of their associates. In short, education, public opinion, and the laws point out to us our mutual duties much more clearly than the chimeras of an incomprehensible religion.

The idea of self-preservation being implanted in us by nature, we require no priest to suggest it to us; experience informs us by what means we best consult our own safety; instructed by her faithful and salutary admonitions we avoid those excesses which might be injurious; we debar ourselves from those gratifications which, in their consequences, might render us unhappy; we submit to momentary privations in order to secure those lasting advantages which we should have forfeited by unreasonable indulgence.

Here, Madam, you have a short but perfect summary of all morals, derived, as they must be, from the nature of man, the uniform experience, and the universal reason of mankind. These precepts are compulsory upon our minds, for they show us that the consequences of our conduct flow from our actions with as natural and inevitable a certainty as the return of a stone to the earth after the impetus is exhausted which detained it in the air. It is natural and inevitable that the man who employs himself in doing good must be preferred to the man who does mischief. Every thinking being must be penetrated with the truth of this incontrovertible maxim, and all the ponderous volumes of theology that ever were composed can add nothing to the force of his conviction; every thinking being will, therefore avoid a conduct calculated to injure either himself or others; he will feel himself under the necessity of doing good to others, as the only method of obtaining solid happiness for himself, and of conciliating to himself those sentiments on the part of others,

without which society would be worse than solitude.

Can any thing be more obvious, Madam, than that faith has no concern in the support of morality? You see how widely separated are these aerial notions from the practical obligations arising out of the nature of things. In fact, the more mysterious and incomprehensible are the dogmas of the church, the more likely are they to draw us aside from the plain dictates of Nature and the straight-forward directions of Reason, whose voice is incapable of misleading us. A candid survey of the causes which produce an infinity of evils that afflict society, will quickly point out the speculative tenets of theology as their most fruitful source. — The intoxication of enthusiasm and the phrenzy of fanaticism concur in overpowering reason, and by rendering men blind and unreflecting, convert them into enemies both of themselves and the rest of the world. It is impossible for the worshippers of a tyrannical, partial, and cruel God, to practice the duties of justice and philanthropy. As soon as the priests have succeeded in stifling within us the commands of Reason, they have already converted us into slaves, in whom they can kindle whatever passions it may please them to inspire us with.

Their interest, indeed, requires that we should be slaves. — They exact from us the surrender of our reason, because our reason contradicts their impostures, and would ruin their plans of aggrandizement. Faith is the instrument by which they enslave us, and make us subservient

to their own ambition. Hence arises their zeal for the propagation of the faith; hence arises their implacable hostility to science, and to all those who refuse submission to their yoke; hence arises their incessant endeavour to establish the dominion of Faith (that is to say, their own dominion), even by fire and sword, the only arguments they condescend to employ.

It must be confessed that society derives but little advantage from this supernatural faith which the church has exalted into the first of virtues. As it regards God, it is perfectly useless to him, since if he wishes mankind to be convinced, it is sufficient that He wills them to be so. It is utterly unworthy of the supreme wisdom of God, who cannot exhibit himself to mortals in a manner contradictory to the reason with which he has endowed them. It is unworthy of the divine justice, which cannot require from mankind to be convinced of that which they cannot understand. It denies the very existence of God himself, by inculcating a belief totally subversive of the only rational idea we are able to form of the Divinity.

As it regards morality, faith is also useless. Faith can add nothing to the inherent sanctity of morals, nothing to their importance. Faith is not only useless, but injurious to society, since, under the plea of its pretended necessity, the world is frequently disfigured by war and bloodshed. In short, faith is self-contradictory—since, by it, we are required to believe in things inconsistent with each other, and even incompatible with the principles laid down in the

books which we have already investigated, and which contain what we are commanded to believe.

¿ To whom then is faith found to be advantageous? —To a few men only, who, availing themselves of its influence to degrade the human mind, contrive to render the labour of the whole world tributary to their own luxury, splendour, and power. ¿ Are the nations of the earth any happier for their faith, or their blind reliance on priests? Certainly not. Look round the universe and confess, with me, that in every country where the lofty church overshadows and darkens the land, there neither morality nor virtue, neither industry nor happiness can take root in the soil ; but on the contrary, wherever the priests are powerful, there the people are sure to be found abject in their minds, and squalid in their condition.

But Hope—Hope, the second in order of the Christian perfections, is ever at hand to console us for the evils inflicted by Faith. We are commanded to be firmly convinced that those who have faith, that is to say, those who believe in priests, shall be amply rewarded in the other world for their meritorious submission in this. Thus hope is founded on faith, in the same manner as faith is established upon hope—faith enjoins us to entertain a devout hope that our faith will be rewarded. ¿ And what is it we are told to hope for? For unspeakable benefits—that is, ¿ benefits for which language contains no expression! So that, after all, we know not what it is we are to hope for. ¿ And

how can we feel a hope or even a wish for any object that is undefinable ? Really, these priests carry their presumption very far in everlastingly prating to us about things of which they, at the same time, acknowledge it is impossible for us to form any idea.

It thus appears, that hope and faith have one common foundation ; the same blow which overturns the one necessarily levels the other with the ground. But let us pause a moment, and endeavour to discover the advantages of Christian hope amongst men. It encourages to the practice of virtue ; it supports the unfortunate under the stroke of affliction ; and consoles the believer in the hour of adversity. But ; what encouragement, what support, what consolation can be imparted to the mind from these undefined and undefinable shadows ? No one, indeed, will deny, that hope is sufficiently useful to the priests, who never fail to call in its assistance for the vindication of Providence, whenever any of the elect have occasion to complain of the unmerited hardship or the transient injustice of his dispensations. Besides, these priests, notwithstanding their beautiful systems, find themselves unable to fulfil the high-sounding promises they so liberally make to all the faithful, and are frequently at a loss to explain the evils which they bring upon their flocks by means of the quarrels they engage in, and the false notions of religion they entertain ; on these occasions the priests have a standing appeal to hope, telling their dupes, that man was not created for this world, that Heaven is his home,

and that his sufferings here will be counterbalanced by indescribable bliss hereafter. — Thus, like quacks, whose nostrums have ruined the health of their patients, they have still left to themselves the advantage of selling hopes to those whom they know themselves unable to cure. Our priests resemble some of our physicians, who begin by frightening us into our complaints, in order that they may make us customers for the hopes, which they offer us at an exorbitant price. This traffic constitutes, in reality, all that is called religion.

The third of the Christian virtues is Charity ; that is, to love God above all things, and our neighbours as ourselves. But before we are required to love God above all things, it seems reasonable that religion should condescend to represent him as worthy of our love. In good faith, Madam, is it possible to feel that the God of the Christians is entitled to our love? Is it possible to feel any other sentiments towards him than those of aversion, when we find him depicted as a partial, capricious, cruel, revengeful, jealous, and sanguinary tyrant? How can we sincerely love the most terrible of Beings? The living God, into whose hands it is dreadful to think of falling? The God who can consign to eternal damnation those very creatures who, without his own consent, would never have existed? Are our theologians aware of what they say, when they tell us that the fear of God is the fear of a child for its parent, which is mingled with love? Are we not bound to hate, — can we by any means avoid detesting a bar-

barous father, whose injustice is so boundless as to punish the whole human race, though innocent, in order to revenge himself upon two individuals for the sin of the apple, which sin he himself might have prevented if he had thought proper? In short, Madam, it is a physical impossibility to love, above all things, a God, whose whole conduct, as described in the Bible, fills us with a freezing horror. If, therefore, the love of God, as the Jansenists assert, is indispensable to salvation, we cannot wonder to find that the elect are so few. Indeed, there are not many persons who can restrain themselves from hating this God; and the doctrine of the Jesuits is, that to abstain from hating him is sufficient for salvation. The power of loving a God, whom religion paints as the most detestable of Beings, would, doubtless, be a proof of the most supernatural grace, that is, a grace the most contrary to nature; to love that which we do not know, is, assuredly, sufficiently difficult; to love that which we fear, is still more difficult; but to love that which is exhibited to us in the most repulsive colours, is manifestly impossible.

We must, after all this, be thoroughly convinced that, except by means of an invisible grace never communicated to the profane, no Christian in his sober senses can love his God; even those devotees who pretend to that happiness are apt to deceive themselves—their conduct resembles that of hypocritical flatterers, who, in order to ingratiate themselves with an odious tyrant, or to escape his resentment, make every profession of attachment, whilst, at the

bottom of their hearts, they execrate him ; or, on the other hand, they must be condemned as enthusiasts who, by means of a heated imagination, become the dupes of their own illusions, and only view the favourable side of a God, declared to be the fountain of all good, yet, nevertheless, constantly delineated to us with every feature of wickedness. Devotees, when sincere, are like women given up to the infatuation of a blind passion by which they are enamoured with lovers, rejected by the rest of the sex as unworthy of their affection. It was said by Madame de Sévigné, that she loved God, as a perfectly well-bred Gentleman whom she had never been acquainted with. But ; can the God of the Christians be esteemed a well-bred gentleman ? Unless her head was turned, one would think that she must have been cured of her passion by the slightest reference to her imaginary lover's portrait as drawn in the Bible, or as it is spread upon the canvass of our theological artists.

With regard to the love of our neighbour, where was the necessity of religion to teach us our duty, which as men we cannot but feel, of cherishing sentiments of good-will towards each other. It is only by showing in our conduct an affectionate disposition to others that we can produce in them correspondent feelings towards ourselves. The simple circumstance of being men is quite sufficient to give us a claim upon the heart of every man who is susceptible of the sweet sensibilities of our nature. ; Who is better acquainted than yourself, Madam, with this truth ? ; Does not your compassionate soul ex-

perience, at every moment, the delightful satisfaction of solacing the unhappy? Setting aside the superfluous precepts of religion, ; think you that you could by any efforts, steel your heart against the tears of the unfortunate? ; Is it not by rendering our fellow-creatures happy that we establish an empire in their hearts? Enjoy then, Madam, this delightful sovereignty; continue to bless with your beneficence all that surround you; the consciousness of being the dispenser of so much good will always sustain your mind with the most gratifying self-applause; those who have received your kindness will reward you with their blessings, and afford you the tribute of affection, which mankind are ever eager to lay at the feet of their benefactors.

Christianity, not satisfied with recommending the love of our neighbour, superadds the injunction of loving our enemies. This precept attributed to the Son of God himself, forms the ground on which our divines claim for their religion a superiority of moral doctrine over all that the philosophers of antiquity were known to teach. Let us, therefore, examine how far this precept admits of being reduced to practice. True, that an elevated mind may easily place itself above a sense of injuries—a noble spirit retains no resentful recollections—a great soul revenges itself by a generous clemency, but it is an absurd contradiction to require that a man shall entertain feelings of tenderness and regard for those whom he knows to be bent on his destruction,—this love of our enemies, which Christianity is so vain of having promulgated,

turns out then to be an impracticable commandment, belied and denied by every Christian at every moment of his life. ; How preposterous to talk of loving that which annoys us ! ; Of cherishing an attachment for that which gives us pain—of receiving an outrage with joy—of loving those who subject us to misery and suffering ! No ; in the midst of these trials, our firmness may perhaps be strengthened by the hope of a reward hereafter, but it is a mere fallacy to talk of our entertaining a sincere love for those whom we deem the authors of our afflictions—the least that we can do is to avoid them, which will not be looked upon as a very strong indication of our love.

Notwithstanding the solemn formality with which the Christian religion obtrudes upon us these vaunted precepts of love of our neighbour, love of our enemies, and forgiveness of injuries, it cannot escape the observation of the weakest amongst us, that those very men who are the loudest in praising, are also the first and most constant in violating them.—Our priests especially seem to consider themselves exempt from the troublesome necessity of adopting for their own conduct a too literal interpretation of this divine law. — They have invented a most convenient salvo, since they affect to exclude all those who do not profess to think as they dictate, not only from the kindness of neighbours, but even from the rights of fellow-creatures. ' On this principle they defame, persecute, and destroy every one who displeases them. ; When do you see a priest forgive ? ; When revenge

is out of his reach ! But it is never their own injuries they punish—it is never their own enemies they seek to exterminate. ; Their disinterested indignation burns with resentment against the enemies of the Most High, who, without their assistance, would be incapable of adjusting his own quarrels ! By an unaccountable coincidence, however, it is sure to happen that the enemies of the church are the enemies of the Most High, who never fail to make common cause with the ministers of the faith, and who would take it extremely ill if his ministers should relax in the measure of punishment due to their common enemy. — Thus our priests are cruel and revengeful from pure zeal—they would ardently wish to forgive their own enemies, ; but how could they justify themselves to the God of Mercies, if they extended the least indulgence to his enemies !

A true Christian loves the Creator, above all things, and consequently he must love him in preference to the creature. We feel a lively interest in every thing that concerns the object of our love ; from all which it follows, that we must evince our zeal, and even, when necessary, we must not hesitate to exterminate our neighbour, if he says or does what is displeasing or injurious to God. In such a case, indifference would be criminal—a sincere love of God breaks out into a holy ardour in his cause, and our merit rises in proportion to our violence.

These notions, absurd as they are, have been sufficient in every age to produce in the world a multitude of crimes, extravagancies, and fol-

lies, the legitimate offspring of a religious zeal. Infatuated fanatics, exasperated by priests against each other, have been driven into mutual hatred, persecution, and destruction; they have thought themselves called upon to avenge the Almighty; they have carried their insane delusions so far as to persuade themselves, that the God of clemency and goodness could look on with pleasure while they murdered their brethren; in the astonishing blindness of their stupidity, they have imagined that in defending the temporalities of the church, they were defending God himself. In pursuance of these errors, contradicted even by the description which they themselves give us of the Divinity, the priests of every age have found means to introduce confusion into the peaceful habitations of men, and to destroy all who dared to resist their tyranny. Under the laughable idea of revenging the all-powerful Creator, these priests have discovered the secret of revenging themselves, and that too, without drawing down upon themselves the hatred and execration so justly due to their vindictive fury and unfeeling selfishness. In the name of the God of nature, they stifled the voice of nature in the breasts of men; in the name of the God of goodness they incited men to the fury of wild beasts; in the name of the God of mercies, they prohibited all forgiveness! The earth has never ceased to groan with the ravages committed by maniacs, under the influence of that zeal which springs from the Christian doctrine of the love of God. The God of the Christians, like the Janus of Roman mythology, has two faces; sometimes he is represented

with the benign features of mercy and goodness; sometimes murder, revenge, and fury issue from his nostrils. And what is the consequence but that the Christians are much more easily terrified at his frightful aspect, than they are recovered from their fears by his aspect of mercy; having been taught to view him as a capricious being, they are naturally mistrustful of him, and imagine that the safest part they can act for themselves is to set about the work of vengeance with great zeal; they conclude that a cruel master cannot find fault with cruel imitators, and that his servants cannot render themselves more acceptable than by extirpating all his enemies.

The preceding remarks show very clearly, Madam, the highly pernicious consequences which result from the zeal engendered by the love of God. If this love is a virtue, its benefits are confined to the priests, who arrogate to themselves the exclusive privilege of declaring when God is offended; who absorb all the offerings, and monopolize all the homage of the devout; who decide upon the opinions that please or displease him; who undertake to inform mankind of the duties this virtue requires from them, and of the proper time and manner of performing them; who are interested in rendering those duties cruel and intimidating in order to frighten mankind into a profitable subjection; who convert it into the instrument of gratifying their own malignant passions, by inspiring men with a spirit of headlong and raging intolerance, which, in its furious course of indiscriminate destruction, holds nothing sacred, and which has inflicted incredible ravages upon all Christian countries.

In conformity with such abominable principles, a Christian is bound to detest and destroy all whom the church may point out as the enemies of God. Having admitted the paramount duty of yielding their entire affections to a rigorous master, quick to resent, and offended even with the involuntary thoughts and opinions of his creatures, they of course, feel themselves bound by entering with zeal into his quarrels, to obtain for him a vengeance worthy of a God, that is to say, a vengeance that knows no bounds. A conduct like this is the natural offspring of those revolting ideas which our priests give us of the Deity. A good Christian is, therefore, necessarily intolerant. It is true that Christianity in the pulpit preaches nothing but mildness, meekness, toleration, peace, and concord; but Christianity in the world is a stranger to all these virtues, nor does she ever exercise them, except when she is deficient in the necessary power to give effect to her destructive zeal.—The real truth of the matter is, that Christians think themselves absolved from every tie of humanity, except with those who think as they do, who profess to believe the same creed;—they have a repugnance, more or less decided, against all those who disagree with their priests in theological speculation.—How common it is to see persons of the mildest character and most benevolent disposition, regard with aversion the adherents of a different sect from their own; the reigning religion, that is, the religion of the sovereign, or of the priests in whose favour the sovereign declares himself, crushes all rival sects, or at least, makes them fully sensible of its superiority and its hatred, in

a manner extremely insulting, and calculated to raise their indignation. By these means it frequently happens that the deference of the prince to the wishes of the priests, has the effect of alienating the hearts of his most faithful subjects, and brings him that execration which ought in justice, to be heaped exclusively upon his sanctimonious instigators.

In short, the private rights of conscience are no where sincerely respected; the leaders of the various religious sects begin, in the very cradle, to teach all Christians to hate and despise each other about some theological point which nobody can understand. The clergy, when vested with power, never preach toleration; on the contrary, they consider every man as an enemy who is a friend to religious freedom, accusing him of lukewarmness, infidelity, and secret hostility—in short, he is denominated a false brother. The Sorbonne declared in the sixteenth century, that it was heretical to say that heretics ought not to be burnt. The ferocious St. Austin preached toleration at one period, but it was before he was duly initiated in the mysteries of the sacerdotal policy, which is ever repugnant to toleration. Persecution is necessary to our priests, to deter mankind from opposing themselves to their avarice, their ambition, their vanity, and their obstinacy. The sole principle which holds the church together is that of a sleepless watchfulness on the part of all its members to extend its power, to increase the multitude of its slaves, to fix odium on all who hesitate to bend their necks to its yoke, or who refuse their assent to its arbitrary decisions.

Our divines have, therefore, you see, very good reasons for raising humility into the rank of virtue. An amiable modesty, a diffident mildness of demeanour, are unquestionably calculated to promote the pleasures and the advantages of society; it is equally certain that insolence and arrogance are disgusting, that they wound our self-love, and excite our aversion by their repulsive conduct;—but that amiable modesty which charms all who come within its influence, is a far different quality from that which is designated humility in the vocabulary of Christians. A truly humble Christian despises his own unworthiness, avoids the esteem of others, mistrusts his own understanding, submits with docility to the unerring guidance of his spiritual masters, and piously resigns to his priest the clearest and most irrefutable conclusions of reason.

But ; to what advantage can this pretended virtue lead its followers? ; How can a man of sense and integrity despise himself? ; Is not public opinion the guardian of private virtue? If you deprive men of the love of glory, and the desire of deserving the approbation of their fellow citizens, ; are you not divesting them of the noblest and most powerful incitements by which they can be impelled to benefit their country? ; What recompense will remain to the benefactors of mankind, if, first of all, we are unjust enough to refuse them the praise they merit, and afterwards debar them from the satisfaction of self-applause, and the happiness they would feel in the consciousness of having done good to

an ungrateful world? — What infatuation, what amazing infatuation, to require a man of upright character, of talents, intelligence, and learning, to think himself on a level with a selfish priest, or a stupid fanatic, who deal out their absurd fables and incoherent dreams. — Our priests are never weary of telling their flocks that pride leads on to infidelity, and that an humble and submissive spirit is alone fitted to receive the truths of the gospel. In good earnest, I should we not be utterly bereft of every claim to the name of rational beings, if we consent to surrender our judgment and our knowledge at the command of a hierarchy, who have nothing to give us in exchange but the most palpable absurdities? I With what face can a reverend Doctor of Nonsense dare to exact from my understanding a humble acquiescence in a bundle of mysterious opinions, for which he is unable to offer me a single solid reason? I Is it then presumptuous to think oneself superior to a class of pretenders, whose systems are a mass of falsities, absurdities and inconsistencies, of which they contrive to make mankind at once the dupes and the victims? I Can pride or vanity be, with justice, imputed to you, Madam, if you see reason to prefer the dictates of your own understanding to the authoritative decrees of Mrs. D——, whose senseless malignity is obvious to all her acquaintance?

If Christian humility is a virtue at all, it can be one only in the cloister; society can derive no sort of benefit from it; it enervates the mind; it benefits nobody but priests, who, under the

pretext of rendering men humble, seek, in reality, only to degrade them, to stifle in their souls every spark of science and of courage, that they may the more easily impose the yoke of faith, that is to say, their own yoke. Conclude, then, with me, that the Christian virtues are chimerical, always useless, and sometimes pernicious to men, and attended with advantage to none but priests. Conclude that this religion, with all the boasted beauty of its morality, recommends to us a set of virtues, and enjoins a line of conduct at variance with good sense. Conclude, that in order to be moral and virtuous, it is far from necessary to adopt the unintelligible creed of the priests, or to pride ourselves upon the empty virtues they preach, and still less to annihilate all sense of dignity in ourselves, by a degrading subjection to the duties they require. Conclude, in short, that the friend of virtue is not, of necessity, the friend of priestcraft, and that a man may be adorned with every human perfection, without possessing one of the Christian virtues.

All who examine this matter with a candid and intelligent eye, cannot fail to see that true morality, that is to say, a morality really serviceable to mankind, is absolutely incompatible with the Christian religion, or any other professed revelation. Whoever imagines himself the favoured object of the Creator's love, must look down with disdain upon his less fortunate fellow creatures, especially if he regards that Creator as partial, choleric, revengeful, and fickle, easily incensed against us, even by our

involuntary thoughts, or our most innocent words and actions; such a man naturally conducts himself with contempt and pride, with harshness and barbarity towards all others whom he may deem obnoxious to the resentment of his Heavenly King. Those men whose folly leads them to view the Deity in the light of a capricious, irritable, and unappeasable despot, can be nothing but gloomy and trembling slaves, ever eager to anticipate the vengeance of God upon all whose conduct or opinions they may conceive likely to provoke the celestial wrath. — As soon as the priests have succeeded in reducing men to a state of stupidity gross enough to make them believe that their ghostly fathers are the faithful organs of the divine will, they naturally commit every species of crime, which their spiritual teachers may please to tell them is calculated to pacify the anger of their offended God. — Men, silly enough to accept a system of morals from guides thus hollow in reasoning, and thus discordant in opinion, must necessarily be unstable in their principles, and subject to every variation that the interest of their guides may suggest. — In short, it is impossible to construct a solid morality, if we take for our foundation the attributes of a deity so unjust, so capricious, and so changeable as the God of the Bible, whom we are commanded to imitate and adore.

Persevere, then, my dear Madam, in the practice of those virtues which your own unsophisticated heart approves; they will insure you a rich harvest of happiness in the present existence; they will insure you a rich return of grati-

tude, respect and love from all who enjoy their benign influence; they will insure you the solid satisfaction of a well-founded self-esteem, and thus provide you with that unfailing source of inward gratification which arises from the consciousness of having contributed to the welfare of the human race.

I am, &c.

LETTER IX.

HAVING already shown you, Madam, the feebleness of those succours which religion furnishes to morals, I shall now proceed to examine whether it procure advantages in themselves really politic, and whether it be true, as has so often been urged by the priests, that it is absolutely necessary to the existence of every government.

Were we disposed to shut our eyes, and deliver ourselves up to the language of our priests, we should believe that their opinions are necessary to the public tranquility, and the repose and security of the State; for those holy guides actually tell the credulous mob, from the bloated pensioner to the lacquey of his lowest tradesman, that princes could not, without the aids of religion, govern their people, and exert themselves for their prosperity and that of the empire. Nor is this all; our spiritual pilots approach the throne, and gaining the ear of the sovereign, make him also believe that an established religion is absolutely necessary to enable him to grasp the sceptre, and

- enjoy the grandeur and state of royalty ; that he must, therefore, conform to the church ; that kings in all ages have been her sons or protectors ; that as the people submit to be governed, so the monarch must submit to the yoke of the church ; that religion is the peace-maker in all political quarrels ; that the enemies of the priesthood are the enemies of all power ; that they who sap the foundations of the altar, would over-throw the throne itself !

Let us examine if these things are so ; for assertion is not proof, and the *ipsi dixerunt* of priests, like the proclamations of princes, are not laws for the world. No ; the former are the thunders of the pulpit, the latter, those of the throne. The mind of the honest citizen, like the face of a granite rock, suffers the blast of both to blow against it, without losing its equilibrium.

We have, then, only to open our eyes and consult history, to be convinced of the falsity of these pretensions, and to appreciate the important services which the Christian priests have rendered to their sovereigns. Ever since the establishment of Christianity we have seen, in all the countries in which this religion has gained ground, that two rival powers are perpetually at war one with the other. We find a government within the government. That is to say, we find the Church, a body of priests, continually opposed to the sovereign power, and in virtue of their pretended *divine* mission and *sacred* office, pretending to give laws to all the sovereigns of the earth.

Nor is this the case with the hierarchy of Rome alone ; the bishops and priests of all seceders from that church have arrogated to them-

selves the same authority. — We find the clergy, puffed up and besotted with the titles they have given themselves, labouring to exact the obedience due to the sovereign, pretending to chimerical and dangerous prerogatives, which none are suffered to question, without 'risking the displeasure of the Almighty. And so well have the priesthood managed this matter, that in many countries we actually see the people more inclined to lean to the authority of the clergy, than to that of the prince. — It is not to the Pope alone, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, that this degraded submission of mind and liberty has been shown; in Protestant countries, also, the clergy have contrived to make it be believed, that the law of the land is founded on their religion; that since obedience is due to the law, it is much more so due to that in which the law is founded. But it is very extraordinary, that in the parliament of Great Britain the legislators never consult the Scriptures, as to what laws they should enact. ; Oh! no; circumstances, the position of the world, the march of intelligence against the iron hand of despotism, give occasion for the enactment of laws; and the Bible is no more thought of in an assembly of legislators, than the "Arabian Night's Entertainments." So much, Madam, for the law of the land being founded on the religion of the clergy.

But let us return to the pretensions of the priesthood. These gentlemen pretend that the sanctity of their mission,—which by the by is mere assertion, for there can be little divine about men mortal like ourselves, little sanctity about men who are eternally squabbling with the rest of the world

for comfortable livings, tythes, and power, prerogative and rule,—these gentlemen pretend, however, that the sanctity of their mission entitles them to dictate to monarchs themselves: and there are not wanting cases, on the page of history, wherein we see the clergy supported by their emissaries and their credulous rabble of devotees, assuming the most ridiculous pretensions, mingling in the affairs of State, and by the most artful methods contriving to get the most pernicious and dangerous projects executed against all those who are honest enough to suspect them of trickery; or, if occasion serves them, to excite the prince to involve his unoffending subjects in quarrels with some neighbouring states; for, while men's minds are distracted by the cry of “war,”—“war;”—“invasion,” “invasion;” when discord and alarm are spread within, and when nothing but trouble appears without, they who had formerly harmlessly questioned the right of the priests to amass wealth and grind the poor for the gratification of their luxury and extravagance, will have leisure to fight the battles of domestic liberty; and honest men who care little about the cry of “the church is in danger,” will condescend to defend the throne at any risk, at all expences. This, however, is but one figure in the group which the entablature of priestcraft offers to the eye of the observer.

Yet, Madam, such is part of the important services which religion has a thousand times pretended to render kings. — The people, blinded by superstition, could hesitate but little between God and the prince of the earth. The priests being the visible organs of an invisible monarch, have

gained immense credit over the human mind. The ignorance of the people has put them, as well as their princes, entirely under the authority of the priesthood. And till a time shall arrive when the people shall put down the power of the priests, their kings must also be the common slaves of the crafty clergy. Do we not find, from history, that great mirror of the universe, that nations have been constantly embroiled by the futile and malicious quarrels of the clergy; that princes and people, who have ever attempted to oppose those overbearing tyrants of the human mind, have been denounced as opinionative heretics, blasphemers, and enemies of God; that the most bigoted nations, people and princes, who have voluntarily yielded to the iron despotism of the priesthood, have been pronounced the greatest favourites of heaven, and all others ripe for perdition. The conclusion is here but one step—the destruction of these last was believed by the former, not only meritorious, but necessary, and accordingly, having caught hold of this fiery link in the chain of discord, nation wars against nation, the ministers of peace are seen in the field of battle, their lives are stained with the murder of mankind, their palaces are enriched with the spoils of the vanquished, and all is holy, just, and good.

Such is the next figure in the base of the pyramidal group of the portraiture of priestcraft. The following is still more hedious:—

The continual attention which the princes of Europe have been forced to pay to the clergy has prevented them from occupying their

thoughts about the welfare of the rest of their industrious subjects, who, in many instances the dupes of the priesthood, have unwittingly become opposed even to the good they have desired to procure by resistance. In like manner the heads of the people, their kings and governors, too weak to resist the torrent of opinions propagated by the clergy, and swallowed without examination by the people, have been forced to yield, to bow, nay, even to caress the priesthood, and to consent to grant it all its demands. Whenever they have wished to resist the encroachments of the clergy, they have encountered concealed snares or open opposition, as the *holy* power was either too weak to ^{stand}act in the face of day, or strong enough to contend in the sunshine. When princes have wished to be listened to by the clergy, these last have invariably contrived to make them cowardly, and to sacrifice the happiness and respect of their people. — We have frequently seen the hands of parricides and rebels, assassins and fanatics armed in the sacerdotal worship, to destroy princes whom the clergy have thought unworthy to reign, because, forsooth, those princes have desired to make all their subjects happy, the people as well as the priests. — France lost two monarchs by the machinations of the clergy. There the priests, under the pretext of avenging God, have murdered kings. This is one way of preserving the yoke on the necks of the multitude. In a word Madam, in all countries, we see that the ministers of religion have exercised at all times, the most frightful licence to establish and perpetuate their power. We find empires torn by their feuds, thrones over

turned by their machinations ; princes immolated to their power and *révenge* ; subjects animated to revolt against the prince that ought to give them more happiness than they actually enjoyed ; and when we take the retrospect of these, we find that the ambition, the cupidity, and vanity of the clergy have been the true causes and motives of all these outrages on the peace of the universe. And it is thus that their religion has so often produced anarchy, and overturned the very empires they pretended to support by its influence.

Thus we have contemplated another horrible demon, in the tablature of priesthood. In the remaining sketch of the 'monsters that compose the group, we will attend to the countenance and the colouring of the drapery ; by which means the reader will recognize the figures at his leisure one by one.

; That sovereigns have not enjoyed peace, even when, with a false humility, devoted to priests, they have submitted to their caprices, become enslaved to their opinions, and allowed them to govern in place of themselves, we will see in the sequel ! For, whenever the sovereign power has become subordinate to the sacerdotal, the prince was only the first servant of the church. ; She has used him merely as a tool to enrich her coffers, to execute her secret, sanguinary decrees, and thus to bathe his hands in the innocent blood of his unoffending subjects, whom the priesthood had marked out for their vengeance, and concealed passions ! History attests that, in place of labouring for the happiness of the people, the sovereign has often been compelled to torment, to persecute,

— to immolate the most worthy citizens :—; And all this to keep on terms with an overbearing, proud, revengeful, ambitious herd of priests ! And all this to gratify the revenge of some one man in a million ; some pampered hypocrite, who arrogated to himself the most hellish projects under the sanction of his office. Nor is it in one religious persuasion this is alone the case ; in a greater or less degree, openly or secretly ; by the sword or the secular power ; by the perversion of laws and the point of the bayonet, we find it true in all persuasions.

How little soever you are disposed to reflect, you will be convinced, Madam, that I do not exaggerate these things. Recent examples prove to you that even in this age, nations are distracted by the intrigues of priests ; you have a hundred times sighed at the sight of the sad folies which puerile questions have produced amongst us. You have shuddered at the frightful consequences which have resulted from the unreasonable squabbles of the clergy. You have trembled with all good citizens at the sight of the tragical effects, which have been brought about by the furious wickedness of a fanatic, who showed in his character every thing that was not sacred. . In fine you have seen the sovereign authority compelled to struggle incessantly against rebellious subjects, who pretend that their conscience, or the interests of religion have obliged them to resist opinions the most agreeable to common sense, and the most equitable.

Our priests more religious and less brilliant than we have witnessed them in former times, are yet

the actors of scenes more terrible than heathenism boasts. They have gloried in civil wars, the overthrow of treaties, the shedding in the very capitol the blood of the innocent; two monarchs successively immolated to the fury of the clergy, who kindle in all parts the fire of sedition. — In France we have seen the Catholic church banish the industrious Protestants; in England we see the furious Protestant wage war against the opinions of those who differ from him, and who cannot believe that three Gods are but one; and that one God only is nevertheless three distinct divinities.

In all Europe we find the same. In Spain religion is the tool with which the march of opinion is arrested; and whoever is not a fanatic is an object of public vengeance. In Germany two great religious factions distract princes and people; the Catholics are taught from their cradles to hate the Protestants; and the Protestants to despise the Catholics as idolaters. Each faction is leagued against the other, with some neighbouring faction of a similar persuasion. — But all are alike the servile creatures of artful priests and clergymen.

Thus you see, Madam, the signal advantages which the priesthood bring to nations. But the clergy forget not to tell us that all those terrible effects which I have detailed, are to be traced to the passions of mankind, and not to the doctrines of the Christian religion, which always recommends charity, concord, and peace. Yet if we reflect on the principles of this religion, we shall perceive that they are incompatible with the fine

maxims which were practiced by the Christian teachers, at a time when they had not the power, and we may believe also the inclination to persecute their enemies, and ensanguine their hands in the blood of their countrymen. Nevertheless we find that the adorers of a jealous God, vindictive and sanguinary, as is obviously the character of the God of the Jews and Christians, could not evince in their conduct moderation, tranquillity, and humanity. The adorers of a God who takes offence at the opinions of his weak creatures, who reprobates, and glories in the extermination of all who do not worship him in a particular way, for the which, by the by, he gives them neither the means nor the inclination, must necessarily be intolerant persecutors. The adorers of a God who has not thought fit to illuminate with an equal portion of light the minds of all his creatures, who reveals his favour, and bestows his kindness on a few only of those creatures, who leaves the remainder in blindness and uncertainty, to follow their passions, or adopt opinions against which the favoured wage war, must of necessity be eternally at odds with the rest of the world, canting about their oracles and mysteries, supernatural precepts, invented purely to torment the human mind, to enthrall it, and leave man answerable for what he could not obey, and punishable for what he was restrained from performing. We need not then be astonished, if, since the origin of Christianity, our priests have never been without disputes. It appears from their conduct, and from their conduct we must judge of their religion, for it is very natural to suppose

that the priests of every religion are fashioned according to the tenets of that religion, else are they not its priests, but a herd of impostors, the annihilation of whose pretensions must always be the duty of the state they are in ; that true priests and true religion may prosper, it appears from their conduct, I say, that God sent his Son upon earth solely to cast among mankind the apple of discord. The ministers of a church founded by Christ himself, who promised to send them his Holy Spirit to lead them into all the truth, have never been in unison with their dogmas. We have seen this infallible church for whole ages enveloped in error. At least its modern seceders say so. ~; And if doctors differ who shall agree? You know, Madam, that in the fourth century by the acknowledgement of the priests themselves, the great body of the church followed the opinions of the Arians, who disavowed even the divinity of Jesus Christ. The spirit of God must then have abandoned his church, else ; why did its ministers fall into this error, and dispute afterwards about so fundamental a dogma of the christian religion ?

Notwithstanding these continual quarrels, the church arrogates to itself the right of fixing the faith of the *true believers*, and in this it pretends to infallibility ; and if the protestant parsons have renounced the lofty and ridiculous pretensions of their catholic brethren, they are not less certain in the infallibility of their decisions ; for they talk with the authority of oracles, and send to hell and damnation all who do not yield submission to their dogmas. Thus on both sides of the cross

we see division and discord ; each party is orthodox in his own eyes, and rails against the other as deceivers ; and too frequently violence settles their disputes, and with them *might is right*, as much as with the conqueror. — The *orthodox* are those among whom the prince ranks ; the *heretics* are those who are not of the established sect. Hindoos, Mussulmen, Christians, all are right in their own eyes ; but let us examine their pretensions.

According to the Christians, there is no salvation, no getting up to heaven, no escaping hell,—a place no one knows where situate, whether in the sun or the nucleus of a comet—but by Christ. Now the Hindoos believe not in Christ but in Vishnou, a God of their own making, therefore the Hindoos cannot get to heaven. And the Mussulmans believe in Mahomet ; but Mahomet was an impostor according to the Christians ; therefore the Mussulmans cannot get to heaven. According to the Protestants, idolators cannot get to heaven ; but according to the same Protestants, the Roman Catholics worship images ; therefore the poor Catholics cannot get to heaven, for no idolator shall enter that blest abode. According to the Catholics, there is no salvation but within the pale of their church, at the head of which his Holiness of Rome presides, as vicar of Jesus Christ upon earth ; therefore the Protestants being without the pale of the Church of Rome, must all be damned. According to the Jews, Christians are impostors ; and the impostor and his followers must both perish ; therefore both sects of Christians, Catholics and Protestants, must go headlong

to the devil. And for the same reason the Mussulmans may go to the devil also. ; In what religion then is salvation to be found ?

Yet although we have considered the priests as the authors of the various religions they as variously support, we shall find, that kings and emperors have been the chief, the final resort of the priests for fixing the faith of the Christians ; and that one stroke of the sword has done more to establish it than all the ratiocinations of the clergy ; yet by this means opinions pleasing to the divinity are propagated. - So Mahomet established the *Coran* ; so the Roman Emperors after Constantine made whole nations of the Germans Christians, and baptized them by thousands in the waters of the Danube. ; The true faith is, then, that which has always princes as its adherents ; the faithful are always those who are employed to exterminate their enemies ; the weak, not the powerful, are the enemies of God ! ; Horrible ! ; most horrible ! In a word, the *princes* of the earth, not the priests of this or that religion, are *infallible* ; they are those whom we must regard as the true founders of the faith over which they preside ; they are those who, in all ages and in all countries, have fixed the faith that must be obeyed ; they are those who have invariably fixed the religion of their subjects.

Ever since Christianity has been adopted by some nations, ; have we not seen that religion has almost entirely occupied the attention of sovereigns ? For the princes, blinded by superstition, have been wholly devoted to the priests, and have believed that prudence required, as the surest means for supporting their own power,

that they also should submit themselves to the clergy, who seemed to be the real leaders and guides of the people, who saw nothing more divine than the ministers of a God, of whom all their ideas resemble the shadows of evening, growing darker, and rendering them more gloomy as the twilight of time rapidly declines. In either case the health of the body politic has never been consulted; it was cowardly sacrificed to the interests of the court, or the vanity and luxury of the priests. — It is by a continuation of superstition on the part of the princes, that we behold the church so richly endowed in times of ignorance; when men believed they would enrich Deity, by putting all their wealth into the hands of the priests of a good God the declared enemy of riches. Savage warriors, destitute of the manners of men, flattered themselves that they could expiate all their sins by founding monasteries and giving immense wealth to a set of men who had made vows of poverty. — It was believed that they would merit from the all-powerful a great advantage by recompensing laziness, which, in the priests, was regarded as a great good, and that the blessings procured by their prayers would be in proportion to the continual and pressing demands their poverty made on the wealthy.

It is thus that by the superstition of princes, the great men of the earth, and the people also, the clergy have become opulent and powerful; that monachism was honoured, and citizens the most useless, the least instructed, but withal the most dangerous, were very well recompensed and became in time the most considerable portion of

the community, surrounded by privileges and immunities, enjoying independence, power, and licence denied to all other ranks and classes ; it was thus that the imprudent devotion of sovereigns put the priests in a condition to resist even those sovereigns themselves, to make laws independent of their authority, and trouble their governments with impunity.

The clergy arriving at this point of power and grandeur, became redoubtable to monarchs themselves, who were frequently forced to submit to the yoke imposed on them by the haughty priesthood. — When the sovereigns yielded, they were the veriest slaves of the priests, the instruments of their passions, the vile adorers of their power. — When they refused to yield, the priests annoyed and embarrassed them by the cruelest stratagems ; hurled against them the anathemas of the church, desolved the people from their obedience, and set subjects and princes in array, declaring that whoever obeyed the church were the favorites of heaven, and those who refused the children of the devil. Nor could the prince in this case keep himself on his throne but by consenting at length to obey the priests. — And there have been times when, in Europe, princes could enjoy no repose for themselves or for their people, unless they unequivocally conceded every point to the caprice of the clergy. For in these times of ignorance, civil broils were as favourable to the cause of the clergy, as devotion, and a weak and poor prince, surrounded by a wretched people, was entirely at the mercy of the priesthood, who would at any moment they chose

annihilate his power, excite his people against him, and hurl him from the height of royalty into the lowest abyss of misery.

— In general, Madam, we find that in countries where religion has gained dominion, the sovereign is necessarily dependant on the clergy, and enjoys power in proportion as he obeys them, for the instant he displeases them, his power vanishes like the dew of morning; and the priests, with the people, and the cross for their banner, hold the balance to weigh the legitimacy of every prince.

— But we no where find, except in the creeds which the priests have formed for themselves, that the laziness, the ignorance, and unreasonable demands of the priesthood should be supported; and on examination we discover that perpetual trickery and conjuration are at work among the priests to prevent the people from prying into the falsehood and chicanery of these organs of the divinity.

‡ Do you not, then, conclude with me, that the interests of the sovereign accord not with the ministers of the Christian religion, who have, in all ages, been the most troublesome of the people among whom they have sprung up, the most rebellious, the most difficult to reduce to obedience, and whose satellites are too often the declared enemies of the person of the king? — And it is thus that Christianity is the firmest support of the throne; that it regards kings as the express images of the divinity; that it addresses a worm of the dust with the title of the *Mightiest* and the *Highest*.

The maxims of the clergy are, however, best calculated to lull kings on the couch of slumber; they are calculated to flatter those on whom the clergy can rely, and who will serve their ambition; and their flatterers can soon change their tone, when the princes have the temerity to question the pernicious tendency of priestly influence. Then the prince is a heretic; his destruction is laudable; heaven rejoices in his overthrow. And all this is the religion of the Bible!

You know, Madam, that these odious maxims have been a thousand times enforced by the priests, who, when they have found themselves puzzled, have invariably replied, that the sovereign cannot encroach upon the authority of the church, 'since it is better to obey God than man. — The priests are devoted to the princes, when the princes are blindly led by the priests. These last preach arrogantly that the former ought to be exterminated, when they refuse to obey the church, that is to say; the priests; yet how terrible soever may be these maxims, how dangerous soever their practice to the security of the sovereign, and the tranquility of the state, they are the immediate consequences drawn from Judaism and Christianity. We find in the Old Testament that the regicide is applauded; that treason and rebellion are approved. Why then should we suppose that God is offended with the thoughts of his creatures, that heretics are displeasing to him? It is very natural to conclude, that if a sovereign be a heretic or impious, that is to say, if he 'disobeys the clergy, or opposes their views of aggrandizement, and is eventually

- successful in carrying his projects as David of old, or Henry VIII. in modern times, then the clergy conform to the king, who is now no longer a heretic, might being right, incapacity error, but the head of the church legitimately king, and the church and he are infallible; the one can do no wrong; and whoever does not conform to the other is incapable of enjoying the rights and privileges of a citizen.

You perceive then, Madam, that such conduct, though talked of by the priests, as founded on the principles of their religion, their precepts are very much opposed to the surety of sovereigns, and the repose of nations. However, following these maxims, the life of the prince too often depends on the caprice of the priesthood, who may declare him a heretic, as has been done by the Pope in many instances, even to excommunication. - And if the priesthood be flatterers of kings, they have been so to establish between themselves and those sovereigns a system of absolute power, which might secure to them an empire not only over the persons, but the consciences of the people. - Whoever resists them is a rebel or a seditious person, or he is persecuted as a blasphemer.

On the other hand, the obedience of the clergy to their prince is only conditional. - They will submit to him, they will flatter his whims, and strengthen his power, provided he submit to their orders, and do not traverse their projects, nor encroach on their livings, nor change any of their dogmas; but so soon as he attempts to contravene their sentiments, there is an open war, in

which the victor is infallibly right, and the vanquished is necessarily wrong.

— These considerations prove how dangerous are the priesthood, since the end they purpose by all their projects, is dominion over the mind of mankind, and by subjugating it, to enslave their persons, and render them the creatures of despotism and tyranny. And we shall find, upon examination, that, with one or two exceptions, the pious have been the enemies of the progress of science, and the developement of the human understanding; for by brutalizing mankind, they have invariably strove to bind them to their yoke. Their avarice, their thirst of power and wealth, have led them to plunge their fellow-citizens in ignorance, in misery, and unhappiness. — They discourage the cultivation of the earth by their system of tythes, their extortions, and their secret projects; they annihilate activity, talents, and industry; their pride is to reign on the ruin of the rest of their species. — The finest countries in Europe have, when blindly submissive to the priests, been the worst cultivated, the thinnest peopled, and the most wretched. The *Inquisition* in Spain, Italy, and Portugal, has only tended to impoverish those countries to debase the mind, and render their subjects the veriest slaves of superstition. — And in countries where we see heaven showering down abundance, the people are poor and famished, while the priests and monks are opulent and bloated. Their kings are without power and without glory; their subjects languish in indigence and wretchedness.

The priests boast of the utility of their office. Independently of their prayers from which the world has for so many ages derived neither instruction nor peace, prosperity nor happiness; their pretensions to teach the rising generations are often frivolous, and sometimes arrogant, since we have found others equally well calculated to the discharge of those functions, who have been good citizens, that have not drawn from the pockets of their neighbours the tenth of their earnings. Thus, in what light soever we view them, the pretensions of the priests are reduced to a non-entity, compared to the disservice they render the community by their exactions and dissolute lives.

If, then, the services of the clergy were properly appreciated, in place of immense revenues and princely power, their salaries would be on a par with the fees of empyrics, and their nostrums as highly valued. But I will only refer you to my former letters, in proof of this, and also in confirmation of their inutility in many concerns, in which they have contrived to push themselves, to the great detriment of society.— They are very sensible, that as the human mind expands and frees itself from the prejudices of early education, their authority dwindles into nothingness. Their endeavour, then, is to mislead princes, by false charges against those who befriend mankind. Nevertheless, princes are actually interested in the progress of reason, and when they attempt to limit its range, they only add to the means by which it always gains ground, and the more victims they immolate to

the rage of the clergy, they erect the more steps on the portico of truth. But every state has its morning twilight of knowledge, its noon-day of science, and its evening of ignorance. The priests know which period suits them best, and that they are busiest in, like owls in the absence of the sun from a particular region of the earth.

You perceive, then, that in banishing philosophy, and repressing intellection, a government sacrifices the dearest interests of the people to a seditious priesthood, for there is not a single priest on earth who does not suppose himself equal to a king—who does not avow as high pretensions, and rule his flock with a despotism equal to that practised in Algiers.

The clergy are essentially the most wicked men of the state, and it requires something equal to a miracle to find one of them otherwise. They are the bantlings of minds in their dotage. Their pulpits are the anvils, whereon all that is destructive of the progress of intellect is hammered forth. Their pretended mission makes them redoubtable; the kindnesses of princes and people they conceive to be duties due to them as the messengers of heaven. Nor have I, in this portraiture, departed from the original; for during a long succession of ages, the clergy have contrived to sacrifice both princes and people to their avarice and passions. Else how happens it that they should become so rich, that princes should honour them with their confidence, and regard them as the props of their power, and the safeguards of their states?—The chief aim of the priesthood is to cajole kings whom they may hold in slavery with the people.

➤ Against all those who meddle with theological questions, the priests complain bitterly, and encourage their princes to side with them, and persecute those who do not submit; proscribe with fury all the friends of reason, and stifle liberal opinions which benefit society. For those very priests who cry "sacrilege" when the princes meddle with their dogmas, or more properly their livings, are indignant against the same princes, when they refuse to destroy their enemies, or treat them as impious, when they stir not in religious broils.

• We have seen some bend their power to the bettering of their people, and the dissemination of knowledge among them; but we have seen the clergy oppose those princes, by a zeal that could result from nothing but their self-interest, which is always increased in proportion as they propagate their mystical jargon, and secure believers to their fanatical practices.

➤; What do we behold useful to society in the monuments of piety furnished by the lives of the priests? We find the most fantastical notions maintained of a lazy monastic life; temples and palaces for the heads of the church, enriched by the hard-earned labours of the poor; for since the establishment of Christianity, the sacerdotal power has been raised on the ruin of nations, and the annihilation of every prince who dared to oppose it. A jealous religion is exclusively calculated to cramp the minds of men, and keep them in terror and suspense. And we see in all ages that the interests of the clergy are incompatible with those of the people. In every state,

therefore, in which the interests of one class of the community is at variance with those of other classes, disorder, arising from discontent and misery from indifference, must be the consequences. This is also the case where the blind lead the blind.

I am, &c.

LETTER X.

I DARE flatter myself, Madam, that I have clearly demonstrated to you, that the Christian religion, far from being the support of sovereign authority, is its greatest enemy; and of having plainly convinced you, that its ministers are, by the very nature of their functions, the rivals of kings, and adversaries the most to be feared by all who value or exercise temporal power. In a word, I think I have persuaded you, that society could better dispense with the services of the priesthood, than it could with the purse of society; and that of the two classes, the priests are less beneficial to the state than the labouring poor.

Let us now examine the advantages which this religion procures to individuals, who are most strongly convinced of its pretended truths, and who conform the most rigidly to its precepts. Let us see if it is calculated to render its disciples more content, more happy, and more virtuous than they would be without the burden of its ministers.

In order to decide this question, we have only to look around us, and consider the effects which this religion produces in minds truly penetrated with its pretended truths. We usually find in all those who profess it the most sincerely, and who practise it the most exactly, chagrin and melancholy, which announce plainly, that they derive no internal peace from that, about which they talk incessantly ; and we have found some of them confess, that while they are obliged to appear to the world as contented and happy, they are internally the victims of a secret inquietude.

Whoever shall meditate seriously on the God of the Old Testament, will be convinced how much license the priests and their followers have, from the despotic and tyrannical character of their Deity, to be overbearing in their exterior, and the slaves of fear within. — True, the doctrine of predestination is a panacea for all crimes, but then ; what a number of human beings it sends to the devil, merely because they did not do what they could not do ! — Even the worker of good works has no hope from them, unless he can persuade himself that he is one of the elect ; while the true believer in this doctrine cannot fail to get into heaven, be his sins what they may.

There is little occasion, however, Madam, to insist on this topic with you ; yet I may glance at the continual melange of devotion and pleasure, of piety and dissipation, of momentary fervour and continued derangement, which the priests and their devotees offer to the world. If priests fast, it is from pride and ambition ; their principles are not better, nor are their passions

weaker than those of other men. Their severities are stoicism blended occasionally with fanaticism; for they are enemies to the refined pleasures of mind, and their unsociability proves them to be the victims of chagrin. - Their jealousy, in fact, compels them to interdict harmless pastimes, which both God and Nature allow.

May we not, then, conclude, that the religion - of these priests is not designed for beings who have to fulfil the duties of society; its precepts are often impracticable; they check activity, and render the complacent frequently morose and disagreeable. For a Christian is forced to abstract his maxims or himself from them, if he would live on a footing with other men. Interest and emulation bid him set the dogmas of his priest aside; and he does so, but is furnished with a panacea in the event of offending God, a salvo for the sins of omission and commission. - In a word, a good Christian is a man of another, not of this world.

Thus we see, that Christians, to belong to the great family of mankind, are every moment compelled to depart from their supernatural speculations. Their passions necessitate them to compromise their tenets, which have not force to extirpate the springs of human nature, as various as the circumstances and objects that solicit observation, and claim a share in the round of pastime man has pleasure in enjoying.

I believe, Madam, that you will now be convinced that the true friends of the human kind and of princes are not the friends of the priesthood. ; But what are the motives which deter-

mine a man to incredulity? Yet is incredulity not that which pretends to domineer over the conscience; it furnishes no pretexts for violating the laws of the understanding; it teaches none to hate and despise men on account of their opinions, at least not of opinions which carry to evil tendency in their practice. The motives, then, for incredulity, as in my case, are infinite, and I do not know that I am either more just or more depraved than other men, but I am confident I entertain no persecuting spirit.

The incredulous who reflect, perceive, that without abandoning society, they have pressing and real motives which invite them to be honest men and good citizens; they understand that reciprocal interest which is the first law of nature; they strive to render themselves agreeable to all, from a principle of justice, and they injure none from a conviction of the utility of personal virtue; they obey the laws, because good laws are for the protection of the good, and the chastisement of the bad. — They have a perfect idea of the beauty of decency, and the propriety of good order; they devise to merit the appellation of their fellow-citizens; they fear to incur their disapprobation or censure. And such are some of the motives which actuate the incredulous, on which the conduct of the free-thinker is grounded.

But you may rejoin, “;And are all the incredulous such as you have pourtrayed?” — The partizans of the Christians have, I believe, found as little to censure in the conduct of the incredulous, as in their own companions in fanaticism. But

the incredulous do not appeal to supernatural aid and divine instruction for the propriety of their conduct; the credulous do so appeal, and there is no question that, if they evinced in their lives the perfection they boast as attainable by their religion, the whole world would follow them in devotion. — A happy temperament, an honest education, the desire to live peaceably, the fear of incurring blame, the habitude of doing always good, and thinking well of mankind, furnish motives for the incredulous to abstain from vice, and practise virtue. — Besides, they have an inexhaustible fund of motives which religion does not furnish to the superstitious, who, when they have crimes to expiate, reconcile themselves to God, and set their conscience at rest. The incredulous man, who does wrong, cannot reconcile himself to society, nor with his own mind; and if he has no hope of recompense in another life, but from the good he does in this, he must of necessity practise virtue and probity.

It appears obvious, that all men who consult their reason, ought to be more reasonable than those who consult only their imagination; that those who consult well their own nature, ought to have more correct ideas of good and evil, of justice and injustice, of honesty and dishonesty, than those who consult a vague theology, and incomprehensible mysteries. The incredulous do the former; the credulous, I mean the Christians, do the latter; and I shall therefore conclude this letter by requesting you will use your own judgment in examining on which class your happiness bids you arrange yourself. I am, &c.

LETTER XI.

By this time, Madam, you will have reflected on what I had the honour to address to you ; and perceived how impossible it is to found a certain and invariable morality on a religion enthusiastic, ambiguous, mysterious, and contradictory, and which never agreed with itself. You know that the God who appears to have taken pleasure in rendering himself unintelligible, that the God who is partial and changeable, that the God whose precepts are at variance one with another, can never serve as the base on which to rear a morality that shall become practicable among the inhabitants of the earth. — In short, how can we found justice and goodness on attributes that are unjust and evil ; yet attributes of a Being who tempts man, whom he created, for the purpose of punishing him when tempted ? — How can we know when we do the will of a God, who has said, *Thou shalt not kill*, and who yet allows his people to exterminate whole nations ? — What idea can we form of the morality of that God, who declares himself pleased with the sanguinary conduct of Moses, of the rebel, the assassin, the adulterer David. — Is it impossible to found the holy duties of humanity on a God, whose favourites have been inhuman persecutors and cruel monsters ? — How can we deduce our duties from the lessons of the priests of a God of peace, who, nevertheless, breathes only sedition,

vengeance, and carnage? How can we take as models for our conduct *saints*, who were useless enthusiasts, or turbulent fanatics, or seditious apostates; who, under the pretext of defending the cause of God, have stirred up the greatest ravages on the earth? What wholesome morality can we reap from the adoption of impracticable virtues, from their being supernatural, which are visibly useless to ourselves, to those among whom we live, and in their consequences often dangerous?

How can we take as guides in our conduct priests, whose lessons are a tissue of unintelligible opinions (*for all religion is but opinion*), puerile and frivolous practices, which these gentlemen prefer to real virtues? In fine, how can we be taught *the truth*, conducted in an unerring path, by men of a changeable morality, calculated upon and actuated by their present interests, and who although they pretend to preach good-will to men, humanity, and peace, have, as their text-book, a volume stained with the records of injustice, inhumanity, sedition, and perfidy?

You know, Madam, that it is impossible to found morality on notions that are so unfixed and so contrary to all our natural ideas of virtue. By virtue we ought to understand the habitual dispositions to do whatever will procure us the happiness of ourselves and our species. By virtue, religion understands only that which may contribute to render us favourable to a hidden God, who attaches his favour to practices and opinions that are too often hurtful to ourselves, and little beneficial to others. The morality of the Christians is a mystic morality, which resembles

the dogmas of their religion ; it is obscure, unintelligible, uncertain, and subject to the interpretation of frail creatures. This morality is never fixed, because it is subordinate to a religion which varies incessantly its principles, and which is regulated according to the pleasure of a despotic divinity, and, more especially, according to the pleasure of priests whose interests are changing daily, whose caprices are as variable as the hours of their existence, and who are, consequently, not always in agreement with one another.

The writings which are the sources whence the Christians have drawn their morality, are not only an abyss of obscurity, but demand continual explications from their masters, the priests, who, in explaining, make them still more obscure, still more contradictory. If these oracles of heaven prescribe to us in one place the virtues truly useful, in another part they approve, or prescribe, actions entirely opposed to all the ideas that we have of virtue. The same God who orders us to be good, equitable, and beneficent, who forbids the revenging of injuries, who declares himself to be the God of clemency and of goodness—shows himself to be as implacable in his rage, announces himself as bringing *the sword, and not peace* : tells us that he is come to set mankind at variance ; and finally, in order to revenge his wrongs, orders rapine, treason, usurpation and carnage. In a word, it is impossible to find in the scriptures any certain principles, or sure rules of morality. You there see in one part a small number of precepts useful and intelligible, and in another part maxims the most extravagant and the most

destructive to the good and happiness of all society.

It is in punctuality to fulfil the superstitious and frivolous duties, that the morality of the Jews in the Old Testament writings is chiefly conspicuous; legal observances, rites, ceremonies, are all that occupied the people of Israel. — In recompense for their scrupulous exactness to fulfil these duties, they were permitted to commit the most frightful of crimes. The virtues recommended by the Son of God, in the New Testament, are not in reality, the same as those which God the Father had made observable in the former case. The New Testament contradicts the Old. It announces that God is not pacified by sacrifices, nor by offerings, nor by frivolous rites. It substitutes in place of these, supernatural virtues, of which I believe I have sufficiently proved the inutility, the impossibility, and the incompatibility with the well-being of man living in society. The Son of God, by the writers of the New Testament, is set at variance with himself; for he destroys in one place what he establishes in another; and moreover, the priests have appropriated to themselves all the principles of his mission. — They are in unison only with God when the precepts of the Deity accord with their present interest. Is it their interest to persecute? — They find that God ordains persecution. Are they themselves persecuted? — They find that this pacific God forbids persecution, and views with abhorrence the persecution of his servants. Do they find that superstitious practices are lucrative to themselves? Notwithstanding the aversion of Jesus

Christ from offerings, rites and ceremonies, they impose them on the people, they surcharge them with mysterious rites : they respect these more than those duties which are of essential benefit to society. If Jesus has not wished that they should avenge themselves, they find that his Father has delighted in vengeance. — If Jesus has declared that his kingdom is not of this world, and if he has shown contempt of riches, they nevertheless find in the Old Testament, sufficient reasons for establishing a hierarchy for the governing of the world in a spiritual sense, as kings do in a political one, — for the disputing with kings about their power, — for exercising in this world, an authority the most unlimited, a licence the most terrific. In a word, if they have found in the Bible, some precepts of a moral tendency and practical utility, they have also found others to justify crimes the most atrocious.

Thus, in the Christian religion, morality uniformly depends on the fanaticism of priests, their passions, their interests : its principles are never fixed, they vary according to circumstances : the God of whom they are the organs, and the interpreters, has not said any thing but what agrees best with their views and what never contravenes their interest. Following their caprices, he changes his advice continually ; he approves, and disapproves, of the same actions : he loves, or detests, the same conduct, he changes crime into virtue, and virtue into crime.

¿ What is the result from all this ? It is that the Christians have not sure principles in moral-

ity : it varies with the policy of the priests, who are in a situation to command the credulity of mankind, and who by force of menaces and terrours oblige men to shut their eyes on their contradictions, and minds the most honest to commit faults the greatest which can be committed against religion. — It is thus that under a God who recommends the love of our neighbour, the Christians accustom themselves from infancy to detest an heretical neighbour, and are almost always in a disposition to overwhelm him by a crowd of arguments received from their priests. — It is thus that, under a God who ordains we should love our enemies and forgive their offences, the Christians hate and destroy the enemies of their priests, and take vengeance, without measure, for injuries which they pretend to have received. — It is thus, that under a just God, a God who never ceases to boast of his goodness, the Christians, at the signal of their spiritual guides, become unjust and cruel, and make a merit of having stifled the cries of nature, the voice of humanity, the counsels of wisdom, and of public interest.

• In a word, all the ideas of justice and of injustice, of good and evil, of happiness and of misfortune, are necessarily confounded in the head of a Christian. — His despotic priest commands him in the name of God to put no reliance on his reason, and the man who is compelled to abandon it for the guidance of a troubled imagination, will be far more likely to consult and admit the most stupid fanaticism as the inspiration of the Most High. In his blindness, he casts

at his feet duties the most sacred, and he believes himself virtuous in outraging every virtue. ; Has he remorse? his priest appeases it speedily, and points out some easy practices by which he may soon recommend himself to God. ; Has he committed injustice, violence, and rapine? he may repair all by giving to the church the goods of which he has despoiled worthy citizens; or by repaying by largesses, which will procure him the prayers of the priests and the favour of heaven. For the priests never reproach men, who give them of this world's goods, of the injustice, the cruelties, and the crimes they have been guilty, to support the church and befriend her ministers; the faults which have almost always been found the most unpardonable, have always been those of most disservice to the clergy.—To question the faith and reject the authority of the priesthood, have always been the most frightful crimes; they are truly the sin against the Holy Ghost, which can never be forgiven either in this world or in that which is to come. To despise these objects which the priests have an interest in making to be respected, is sufficient to qualify one for the appellation of a blasphemer and an impious man. These vague words, void of sense, suffice to excite horror in the mind of the weak vulgar. The terrible word sacrilege, designates an attempt on the person, the goods, and the rights of the clergy. The omission of some useless practice is exaggerated and represented as a crime more detestable than actions which injure society. In favour of fidelity to fulfil the duties of religion, the priest easily pardons his

slave submitting to vices, criminal debaucheries, and excesses the most horrible. You perceive then, Madam, that the Christian morality has really in view but the utility of the priests. Why then should you be surprised that they endeavour to make themselves arbitrary and sovereign ; that they deem as faults and as criminal, all the virtues which agree not with their marvellous systems. — The Christian morality appears only to have been proposed to blind men, to disturb their reason, to render them abject and timid, to plunge them into vassalage, to make them lose sight of the earth which they inhabit, for visions of bliss in heaven. By the aid of this morality the priests have become the true masters here below ; they have imagined virtues and practices useful only to themselves ; they have proscribed and interdicted those which were truly useful to society ; they have made slaves of their disciples, who make virtue to consist in blind submission to their caprices.

To lay the foundations of a good morality, it is absolutely necessary to destroy the prejudices which the priests have inspired in us ; it is necessary to begin by rendering the mind of man energetic, and freeing it from those vain terrors which have enthralled it ; it is necessary to renounce those supernatural notions which have till now hindered men from consulting the volume of nature, which have subjected reason to the yoke of authority ; it is necessary to encourage man, to undeceive him as to those prejudices which have enslaved him ; to annihilate in his bosom those false theories which corrupt his nature, and

which are in fact, infidel guides, destructive of the real happiness of the species. —It is necessary to undeceive him as to the idea of his loathing himself, and especially that other idea that some of his fellow creatures are not to labour with their hands for their support, but in spiritual matters for his happiness. In fine, it is necessary to influence him with self love, that he may merit the esteem of the world, the benevolence and consideration of those with whom he is associated by the ties of nature or public economy.

The morality of religion appears calculated to confound society and replunge its members into the savage state. The christian virtues tend evidently to isolate man, to detach him from those to whom nature has united him, and to unite him to the priests ; to make him lose sight of a happiness the most solid, to occupy himself only with dangerous chimeras. We only live in society to procure the more easily those kindnesses, succours, and pleasures, which we could not obtain living by ourselves. If it had been destined that we should live miserably in this world, that we should detest ourselves, fly the esteem of others, voluntarily afflict ourselves, have no attachment for any one,—society would have been one heap of confusion, the human kind savages and strangers to one another.

However, if it is true that God is the author of man, it is God who renders man sociable ; it is God who wishes man to live in society where he can obtain the greatest good. If God is good, he cannot approve that men should leave society to become miserable ; if God is the author of rea-

son, he can only wish that men who are possessed of reason should employ this distinguishing gift to procure for themselves all the happiness its exercise can bring them. — If God has revealed himself, it is not in some obscure way, but in a revelation the most evident and clear of all those supposed revelations, which are visibly contrary to all the notions we can form of the divinity.

We are not however obliged to dive into the marvellous to establish the duties man owes to man ; since God has very plainly shown them in the wants of one and the good offices of another person. But it is only by consulting our reason that we can arrive at the means of contributing to the felicity of our species. It is then evident that in regarding man as the creature of God, — God must have designed that man should consult his reason, that it might procure him the most solid happiness, and those principles of virtue which nature approves.

What then might not our opinions be, were we to substitute the morality of reason for the morality of religion ? In place of a partial and reserved morality for a small number of men, let us substitute a universal morality, intelligible to all the inhabitants of the earth, and of which all can find the principles in nature. Let us study this nature, its wants and its desires ; let us examine the means of satisfying it : let us consider what is the end of our existence in society, — we shall see that all those who are thus associated, are compelled by their natures to practise affection one to another, benevolence, esteem and relief, if desired ; we shall see what is that line of conduct

which necessarily excites hatred, ill-will, and all those misfortunes which experience makes familiar to mankind ; our reason will tell us what actions are the most calculated to excite real happiness and good will, the most solid und extensive ; let us weigh these with those that are founded on visionary theories ; their difference will at once be perceptible ; the advantages which are permanent we will not sacrifice for those that are momentary ; we will employ all our faculties to augment the happiness of our species ; we will labour with perseverance and courage to extirpate evil from the earth ; we will assist as much as we can, those who are without friends ; we will seek to alleviate their distresses and their pains ; we will merit their regard, and thus fulfil the end of our being on earth.

In conducting ourselves in this manner, our reason prescribes a morality agreeable to nature, reasonable to all, constant in its operation, effective in its exercise in benefitting all, in contributing to the happiness of society, collectively and individually, in distinction to the mysticism preached up by priests. - We shall find in our reason and in our nature the surest guides, superior to the clergy who only teach us to benefit themselves. - We shall thus enjoy a morality as durable as the race of man. We shall have precepts founded on the necessity of things ; that will punish those transgressing them, and rewarding those who obey them. Every man who shall prove himself to be just, useful, beneficent, will be an object of love to his fellow citizens ; every man who shall prove himself

unjust, useless and wicked, will become an object of hatred to himself as well as to others: he will be forced to tremble at the violation of the laws; he will be compelled to do that which is good to gain the good will of mankind and preserve the regard of those who have the power of obliging him to be a useful member of the State.

Thus, Madam, if it should be demanded of you, what you would substitute for the benefit of society in place of visionary reveries. — I reply a sensible morality, a good education, profitable habits, self-evident principles of duty, wise laws which even the wicked cannot misunderstand, but which may correct their evil purposes, and recompenses that may tend to the promotion of virtue. — The education of the present day tends only to make youth the slaves of superstition; the virtues which it inculcates on them are only those of fanaticism, to render the mind subject to the priests for the remainder of life; the motives to duty are only fictitious and imaginary; the rewards and punishments which it exhibits in an obscure glimmering, produce no other effect than to make useless enthusiasts and dangerous fanatics. The principles on which enthusiasm establishes morality are changing and ruinous; those on which the morality of reason is established are fixed, and cannot be overturned. Seeing then that man, a reasonable being, should be chiefly occupied about his preservation and happiness; that he should love virtue; that he should be sensible of its advantages; that he should fear the consequences of crime, & is it to be

wondered I should insist so much on the practice of virtue as his chief good? Men ought to hate crime, because it leads to misery. Society to exist must receive the united virtue of its members, obedience to good laws, the activity and intelligence of citizens to defend its privileges and its rights. Laws are good when they invite the members of society to labour for reciprocal good offices. Laws are just when they recompense or punish in proportion to the good or evil which is done to society. Laws supported by a visible authority should be founded on present motives; and thus they would have more force than those of religion which are founded on uncertain motives, imaginary and removed from this world, and which experience proves cannot suffice to curb the passions of bad men, nor show them their duty by the fear of punishments after death.

If in place of stifling human reason, as is too much done, its perfectibility were studied: if in place of deluging the world with visionary notions, truth were inculcated; if in place of pleading a supernatural morality, a morality agreeable to humanity and resulting from experience were preached, we should no longer be the dupes of imaginary theories, nor of terrifying fables as the bases of virtue. Every one would then perceive that it is to the practice of virtue, to the faithful observation of the duties of morality, that the happiness of individuals and of society is to be traced. — Is he a husband? he will perceive that his essential happiness is to show kindness, attachment, and tenderness to the com-

panion of his life, destined by his own choice to share his pleasures and endure his misfortunes. And on the other hand, she, by consulting her true interests, will perceive that they consist in rendering homage to her husband, in interdicting every thought that could alienate her affections, diminish her esteem and confidence in him. Fathers and mothers will perceive, that their children are destined to be one day their consolation and support in old age ; and that by consequence they have the greatest interest in inspiring them, in early life, with sentiments of which they may themselves reap the benefit when age or misfortune may require the fruits of those advantages that result from a good education. - Their children, early taught to reflect on these things, will find their interest to lie in meriting the kindness of their parents, and in giving them proofs that the virtues they are taught will be communicated to their posterity. The master will perceive, that to be served with affection, he owes good will, kindness, and indulgence, to those at whose hands he would reap advantages, and by whose labour he would increase his prosperity ; and servants will discover how much their happiness depends on fidelity, industry, and good temper in their situations. Friends will find the advantages of a kindred heart for friendship, and the reciprocity of good offices. The members of the same family will perceive the necessity of preserving that union which nature has established among them ; to render mutual benefits in prosperity or in adversity. Societies, if they reflect on the end of their association, will

perceive, that to secure it they must observe good faith and punctuality in their engagements. The citizen, when he consults his reason, will perceive how much it is necessary, for the good of the nation to which he belongs, that he should exert himself to advance its prosperity, or, in its misfortunes, to retrieve its glory. By consequence every one in his sphere, and using his faculties for this great end, will find his own advantage in restraining the bad as dangerous and opposing enemies to the state, as enemies to himself.

In a word, every man who will reflect for himself will be compelled to acknowledge the necessity of virtue for the happiness of the world. It is so obvious that justice is the basis of all society ; that good will and good offices necessarily procure for men affection and respect ; that every man who respects himself ought to seek the esteem of others ; that it is necessary to merit the good opinion of society ; that he ought to be jealous of his reputation ; that a weak being who is every instant exposed to misfortunes, ought to know what are his duties, and how he should practise them for the benefit of himself and the assembly of which he is a member.

If we reflect for one moment on the effects of the passions, we shall perceive the necessity of repressing them, if we would spare ourselves vain regrets and useless sorrows, which certainly always afflict those who obey not the laws. Thus, a single reflection will suffice to show the impropriety of anger, the dreadful consequences of revenge, calumny, and backbiting. Anger is

madness ; it is the child of folly, the enemy of society.

If the man who consults his reason has real and powerful motives for doing good to others and abstaining from injuring them, he has present motives equally urgent to restrain him from the commission of vice. — Experience may suffice to show him that if he become sooner or later the victim of his excesses, he ceases to be the friend of virtue, and exists only to serve vice which will infallibly punish him. This being allowed, prudence, or the desire of preserving one's self free from the contamination of evil, ought to inculcate to every man his path of duty ; and, unless blinded by his passions, he must perceive how much moderation in his pleasures, temperance, chastity, contribute to happiness ; that those who transgress in these respects are necessarily the victims of ill-health, and too often pass a life both infirm and unfortunate, which terminates soon in death.

How is it possible then, Madam, from visionary theories to arrive at these conclusions, and establish from supernatural fantasies the principles of private and public virtue ? Shall we launch into unknown regions to ascertain our duty and to keep our station in society ? Is it not sufficient if we wish to be happy that we should endeavour to preserve ourselves in those maxims which reason approves, and on which virtue is founded ? Every man who would perish, who would render his existence miserable, whoever would sacrifice permanent happiness for present pleasure is a fool, who reflects not on the interests that are dearest to him.

— If there are any principles so clear as the morality of humanity has been and is still proved to be, they are such as men ought to observe. They are not obscure notions, mysticism, contradictions, which have made of a science the most obvious and best demonstrated, an unintelligible science, mysterious and uncertain to those for whom it is designed. — In the hands of the priests, morality has become an enigma; they have founded our duties on the attributes of a deity whom the mind of man cannot comprehend, in place of founding them on the character of man himself. They have thrown in among them the foundations of an edifice which is made for this earth. — They have desired to regulate our manners agreeably to equivocal oracles which every instant contradict themselves, and which too often render their devotees useless to society and to themselves. They have pretended to render their morality more sacred by inviting us to look for recompenses and punishments removed beyond this life, but which they announce in the name of the divinity. In fine, they have made man a being who may not even strive at perfection, by a preordination of some to bliss, and consequent damnation of others, whose insensibility is the result of this selection.

Need we not, then, wonder that this supernatural morality should be so contrary to the nature and the mind of man? It is in vain that it aims at the annihilation of human nature which is so much stronger, so much more powerful, than imagination. In despite of all the subtile and marvellous speculations of the priests, man continues

always to love himself, to desire his well being, and to flee misfortune and sorrow. He has then always been actuated by the same passions.—When these passions have been moderate and have tended to the public good they are legitimate, and we approve those actions which are their effects. When these passions have been disordered, hurtful to society, or to the individual, he condemns them; they punish him; he is dissatisfied with his conduct which others cannot approve. Man always loves his pleasures, because in their enjoyment he fulfils the end of his existence; if he exceeds their just bounds he renders himself miserable.

The morality of the clergy, on the other hand, appears calculated to keep nature always at variance with herself, for it is almost always without effect even on the priesthood. Their chimeras serve but to torture weak minds, and to set the passions at war with nature and their dogmas. When this morality professes to restrain the wicked, to curb the passions of men, it operates in opposition to the established laws of natural religion; for by preserving all its rigour, it becomes impracticable; and it meets with real devotees only in some few fanatics who have renounced nature, and who would be singular, even if their oddities were injurious to society. This morality adopted for the most part by devotees, without eradicating their habits or their natural defects, keeps them always in a state of opposition even with themselves.—Their life is a round of faults and of scruples, of sins and remorse, of crimes and expiations, of pleasures which they

enjoy, but for which they again reproach themselves for having tasted. In a word, the morality of superstition necessarily carries with it into the heart and the family of its devotees, inward distress and affliction; it makes of enthusiasts and fanatics, scrupulous devotees; it makes a great many insensible and miserable; it renders none perfect, few good; and those only tolerable whom nature, education, and habit had moulded for happiness.

It is our temperament which decides our condition; the acquisition of moderate passions, of honest habits, sensible opinions, laudable examples, and practical virtues, is a difficult task, but not impossible when undertaken with reason for one's guide. It is difficult to be virtuous and happy with a temperament so ardent as to sway the passions to its will. One must in calmness consult reason as to his duty. Nature, in giving us lively passions and a susceptible imagination, has made us capable of suffering the instant we transgress her bounds. She then renders us necessary to ourselves, and we cannot proceed to consult our real interest if we continue in indulgence that she forbids. — The passions which reason cannot restrain are not to be bridled by religion. It is in vain that we hope to derive succours from religion, if we despise and refuse what nature offers us. Religion leaves men just such as nature and habit have made them: and if it produce any changes on some few, I believe I have proved that those changes are not always for the better.

Congratulate yourself then, Madam, on being

born with good dispositions, of having received honest principles, which shall carry you through life in the practice of virtue, and in the love of a fine and exalted taste for the rational pleasures of our nature. Continue to be the happiness of your family which esteems and honours you. Continue to diffuse around you the blessings you enjoy ; continue to perform only those actions which are esteemed by all the world, and all men will respect you. Respect yourself, and others will respect you. These are the legitimate sentiments of virtue and of happiness. Labour for your own happiness, and you will promote that of your family, who will love you in proportion to the good you do it. Allow me to congratulate myself, if in all I have said, I have in any measure swept from your mind those clouds of fanaticism which obscure the reason ; and to felicitate you on your having escaped from vague theories of imagination. Abjure superstition, which is calculated only to make you miserable ; let the morality of humanity be your uniform religion ; that your happiness may be constant, let reason be your guide ; that virtue may be the idol of your soul, cultivate and love only what is virtuous and good in the world ; and if there be a God, who is interested in the happiness of his creatures ; if there be a God, full of justice and goodness, he will not be angry with you for having consulted your reason ; if there be another life, your happiness in it cannot be doubtful, if God rewards every one according to the good done here.

I am, with respect, &c.

LETTER XII.

PERMIT me, Madam, to felicitate you on the happy change which you say has taken place in your opinions. Convinced by reasons as simple as obvious, your mind has become sensible of the futility of those notions which have for a long time agitated it; and the inefficacy of those pretended succours which religious men boasted they could furnish, is now apparent to you. You perceive the evident dangers which result from a system that serves only to render men enemies to individual and general happiness.

I see with pleasure that reason has not lost its authority over your mind; and that it is sufficient to show you the truth that you may embrace it. You may congratulate yourself on this, which proves the solidity of your judgment. For it is glorious to give one's self up to reason, and to be the votary of common sense. Prejudice so arms mankind, that the world is full of people who slight their judgment; nay, who resist the most obvious pleas of their understanding. Their eyes long shut to the light of truth, are unable to bear its rays; but they can endure the glimmerings of superstition, which plunges them in still darker obscurity.

I am not, however, astonished at the embarrassment you have hitherto felt, nor at your cautious examination of my opinions, which are better understood the more thoroughly they are examined and compared with those they oppose. It is impossible to annihilate at once deep-rooted

prejudices. The mind of man appears to waver in a void, when those ideas are attacked on which it has long rested. It finds itself in a new world, wherein all is unknown. Every system of opinions is but the effect of habit. The mind has as great difficulty to disengage itself from its custom of thinking, and reflect on new ideas, as the body has to remain quiescent after it has long been accustomed to exercise. Should you, for instance, propose to your friend to leave off snuff, as a practice neither healthful nor agreeable in company, he will not probably listen to you, or if he should, it will be with extreme pain that he can bring himself to renounce a habit long familiarized to him.

It is precisely the same with all our prejudices; those of religion have the most powerful hold of us. From infancy we have been familiarized with them; habit has made them a sort of want we cannot dispense with: our mode of thinking is formed, and familiar to us; our mind is accustomed to engage itself with certain classes of objects; and our imagination fancies that it wanders in chaos when it is not fed with those chimeras to which it had been long accustomed. Fantoms, the most horrible, are even clear to it; objects the most familiar to it, if viewed with the calm eye of reason, are disagreeable and revolting.

Religion, or rather its superstitions, in consequence of the marvellous and bizzare notions it engenders, gives the mind continual exercise; and its votaries fancy they are doomed to a dangerous inaction when they are suddenly deprived

of the objects on which their imagination exerted its powers. Yet is this exercise so much the more necessary as the imagination is by far the most lively faculty of the mind. Hence, without doubt, it becomes necessary, men should replace stale fooleries by those which are novel. This is, moreover, the true reason why devotion so often affords consolation in great disgraces, gives diversion for chagrin, and replaces the strongest passions, when they have been quenched by excess of pleasure and dissipation. The marvellous arguments, chimeras multiply as religion furnishes activity and occupation to the fancy; habit renders them familiar, and even necessary; terrors themselves, even minister food to the imagination; and religion, the 'religion of priestcraft, is full of terrors. Active and unquiet spirits continually requires this nourishment; the imagination requires to be alternately alarmed and consoled; and there are thousands who cannot accustom themselves to tranquility, and the sobriety of reason. Many persons also require fancies to make them religious, and they find these succours in the dogmas of priestcraft.

These reflections will serve to explain to you the continual variations to which many persons are subject, especially on the subject of religion. Sensible, like barometers, you behold them wavering without ceasing; their imagination floats, and is never fixed: so often as you find them freely given up to the blackness of superstition, so often may you behold them the slaves of pernicious prejudices. Whenever they tremble at the feet of their priests, then are their necks under the

yoke. Even people of spirit and understanding in other affairs, are not altogether exempt from these variations of mental religious temperament; but their judgment is too frequently the dupe of the imagination. And others, again, timid and doubting, without spirit, are in perpetual torment.

What do I say? Man is not, and cannot always be the same. His frame is exposed to revolutions and perpetual vicissitudes; the thoughts of his mind necessarily vary with the different degrees of changes to which his body is exposed. — When the body is languid and fatigued, the mind has not usually much inclination to vigour and gaiety. The debility of the nerves commonly annihilates the energies of the soul, although it be so remarkably distinguished from the body; persons of a bilious and melancholy temperament, are rarely the subjects of joy; dissipation importunes some, gaiety fatigues others. Exactly after the same fashion, there are some who love to nourish sombre ideas, and these, religion supplies them. Devotion affects them like the vapours; (superstition is an inveterate malady, for which there is no cure in medicine. And it is impossible to keep him free from superstition whose breast, the slave of fear, was never sensible of courage; nay, soldiers and sailors, the bravest of men, have too often been the victims of superstition. It is education alone that operates in radically curing the human mind of its errors.)

Those who think it sufficient, Madam, to render a reason for the variations which we so fre-

quently remark in the ideas of men, acknowledge that there is a secret bent of the minds of religious persons to prejudices, from which we shall almost in vain endeavour to rescue their understandings. You perceive, at present, what you ought to think of those secret transitions which our priest would force on you, as the inspirations of Heaven, as divine solicitations, the effects of grace; though they are, nevertheless, only the effects of those vicissitudes to which our constitution is liable, and which affect the robust, as well as the feeble; the man of health, as well as the valetudinarian.

If we might form a judgment of the correctness of those notions which our teachers boast of, in respect to our dissolution at death, we shall find reason to be satisfied, that there is little or no occasion that we should have our minds disturbed during our last moments. It is then, say they, that it is necessary to attend to the condition of man; it is then that man, undeceived as to the things of this life, acknowledges his errors. But there is, perhaps, no idea in the whole circle of theology more unreasonable than this, of which the credulous, in all ages, have been the dupes. Is it not at the time of a man's dissolution, that he is the least capable of judging of his true interest? His bodily frame racked, it may be, with pain; his mind is necessarily weakened or chafed; or if he should be free from excruciating pain, the lassitude and yielding of nature to the irrevocable decrees of fate at death, unfit a man for reasoning and judging of the sophisms that are proposed as panaceas for all his errors.—

There are, without doubt, as strange notions as those of religion ; but who knows that body and soul sink alike at death ?

— It is in the case of health that we can promise ourselves to reason with justness ; it is then that the soul, neither troubled by fear, nor altered by disease, nor led astray by passion, can judge soundly of what is beneficial to man. The judgments of the dying can have no weight with men in good health ; and they are the veriest impostours who lend them belief. The truth can alone be known, when both body and mind are in good health. No man, without evincing an insensible and ridiculous presumption, can answer for the ideas he is occupied with, when worn out with sickness and disease ; — yet have the inhuman priests the effrontery to persuade the credulous to take as their examples the words and actions of men, necessarily deranged in intellect, by the derangement of their corporeal frame. In short, since the ideas of men necessarily vary with the different variations of their bodies, the man who presumes to reason on his death-bed with the man in health, arrogates what ought not to be conceded.

Do not then, Madam, be discouraged nor surprised, if you should sometimes think of ancient prejudices reclaiming the rights they have for a long time exercised over your reason ; attribute then these vacillations to some derangement in your frame — to some disordered movements of mind, which, for a time, suspend your reason. — Think that there are few people who are constantly the same, and who see with the same eyes.

Our frame being subject to continual variations, it necessarily follows that our modes of thinking will vary. We think one custom the result of pusillanimity, when the nerves are relaxed, and our bodies fatigued. We think justly when our body is in health, that is to say, when all its parts are fulfilling their various functions. There is one mode of thinking, or one state of mind, which in health we call uncertainty, and which we rarely experience, when our frame is in its ordinary condition. — We do not then reason justly, when our frame is not in a condition to leave our mind subject to incredulity.

¿ What then is to be done, when we would calm our mind, when we wish to reflect, even for an instant? Let reason be our guide, and we shall soon arrive at that mode of thinking, which shall be advantageous to ourselves. In effect, Madam, how can a God who is just, good, and reasonable, be irritated by the manner in which we shall think, seeing that our thoughts are always involuntary, and that we cannot believe as we would, but as our convictions increase, or become weakened. — Man is not then for one instant the master of his ideas, which are every moment excited by objects over which he has no controul, and causes which depend not on his will or exertions. St. Augustine himself bears testimony to this truth : “ There is not,” says he, “ one man who is at all times master of that which presents itself to his spirit,” — Have we not, then, good reason to conclude, that our thoughts are entirely indifferent to God, seeing they are excited by objects over which we have no controul, and, by consequence, that they cannot be offensive to the Deity.

If our teachers pique themselves on their principles, they ought to carry along with them this truth, that a just God cannot be offended by the changes which take place in the minds of his creatures. They ought to know that this God, if he is wise, has no occasion to be troubled with the ideas that enter the mind of man ; that if they do not comprehend all his perfections, it is because their comprehension is limited. They ought to recollect, that if God is all powerful, his glory and his power cannot be affected by the opinions and ideas of weak mortals, any more than the notions they form of him, can alter his essential attributes. In fine, if our teachers had not made it a duty to renounce common sense, and to close with notions that carry in their consequences the contradictory evidence of their premises, they would not refuse to avow that God would be the most unjust, the most unreasonable, the most cruel of tyrants, if he should punish beings, whom he himself created imperfect, and possessed of a deficiency of reason and common sense.

Let us reflect a little longer, and we shall find that the theologians have studied to make of the Divinity a ferocious master, unreasonable and changing, who exacts from his creatures qualities they have not, and services they cannot perform. The ideas they have formed of this unknown being, are almost always borrowed from those of men of power, who, jealous of their power and respect from their subjects, pretend that it is the duty of these last to have for them sentiments of submission, and punish with rigour those, who by their conduct or their discourse, announce sentiments

not sufficiently respectful to their superiours. Thus you see, Madam, that God has been fashioned by the clergy on the model of an uneasy despot, suspicious of his subjects, jealous of the opinions they may entertain of him, and who, to secure his power, cruelly chastises those who have not littleness of mind sufficient to flatter his vanity, nor courage enough to resist his power.

It is evident that it is on ideas so ridiculous, and so contrary to those which nature offers us of the Divinity, that the absurd system of the priests is founded, which they persuade themselves is very sensible and agreeable to the opinions of mankind; and which is very seriously insulted, they say, if men think differently; and which will punish with severity those who abandon themselves to the guidance of reason, the glory of man. Nothing can be more pernicious to the human kind than this fatal madness, which deranges all our ideas of a just God—of a God, good, wise, all-powerful, and whose glory and power, neither the devotion nor rebellion of his creatures can affect. In consequence of these impertinent suppositions of the priesthood, men have ever been afraid to form notions agreeable to the mysterious Sovereign of the universe, on whom they are dependent; their mind is put to the torture to divine his incomprehensible nature, and, in their fear of displeasing him, they have assigned to him human attributes, without perceiving that when they pretend to honour him, they dishonour Deity, and that being compelled to bestow on him qualities that are incompatible with Deity, they actually annihilate from their mind the pure

representation of Deity, as witnessed in all nature. It is thus, that in almost all the religions on the face of the earth, under the pretext of making known the Divinity, and explaining his views towards mortals, the priests have rendered him incomprehensible, and have actually promulgated, under the garb of religion, nothing save absurdities, by which, if we admit them, we shall destroy those notions which nature gives us of Deity.

When we reflect on the Divinity, do we not see that mankind have plunged farther and farther into darkness, as they assimilated him to themselves; that their judgment is always disturbed when they would make their Deity the object of their meditations; that they cannot reason justly, because they never have any but obscure and absurd ideas: that they are almost always in uncertainty, and never agree with themselves, because their principles are replete with doubt; that they always tremble, because they imagine that it is very dangerous to be deceived; that they dispute without ceasing, because that is impossible to be convinced of any thing, when they reason on objects of which they know nothing, and which the imaginations of men are forced to paint differently: in fine, that they cruelly torment one another about opinions equally uninteresting, though they attach to them the greatest importance, and because the vanity of the one party never allows it to subscribe to the reveries of the other.

It is thus that the divinity has become to us a source of evil, division, and quarrels; it is thus

that his name alone inspires terroure; it is thus that religion has become the signal of so many combats, and has always been the true apple of discord among unquiet mortals, who always dispute with the greatest heat, on subjects of which they can never have any true ideas. They make it a duty to think and reason on his attributes; and they can never arrive at any just conclusions, because their mind is never in a condition to form true notions of what strikes their senses. In the impossibility of knowing the Deity by themselves, they have recourse to the opinion of others whom they consider more adroit in theology, and who pretend to an intimate acquaintance with God, being inspired by him, and having secret intelligence of his purposes with regard to the human kind. Those privileged men teach nothing to the nations of the earth, except what their reveries have reduced to a system, without giving them ideas that are clear and definite. They paint God under characters the most agreeable to their own interests; they make of him, a good monarch for those who blindly submit to their tenets, but terrible to those who refuse not to blindly follow them.

Thus you perceive, Madam, what those men are who have obviously made of the Deity an object so bizzare as they announce him, and who, to render their opinions the more sacred, have pretended that he is grievously offended, when we do not admit implicitly the ideas they promulgate of God. In the books of Moses, God defines himself, *I am, that I am*; yet does this inspired writer detail the history of this God,

as a tyrant who tempts men, and who punishes them for being tempted, who exterminated all the human kind by a deluge, except a few of one family, because one man had fallen; in a word, who, in all his conduct, behaves as a despot, whose power dispenses with all the rules of justice, reason, and goodness.

; Have the successors of Moses transmitted to us ideas more clear, more sensible, more comprehensible of the divinity? ; Has the son of God made his father perfectly known to us? ; Has the church, perpetually boasting of the light she diffuses among men, become more fixed and certain, to do away our uncertainty? ; Alas! In spite of all these supernatural succours, we know nothing in nature beyond the grave; the ideas which are communicated to us, the recitals of our infallible teachers, are calculated only to confound our judgment, and reduce our reason to silence. They make of God a pure spirit; that is to say, a being who has nothing in common with matter, and who, nevertheless, has created matter, which he has produced from his own fiat—his essence or substance. They have made him the mirror of the universe, and the soul of the universe. They have made him an infinite being, who fills all space by his immensity, although the material world occupies some part in space. They have made him a being all powerful, but whose projects are incessantly varying, who neither can nor will maintain man in good order, nor permit the freedom of action necessary for rational beings, and who is alternately pleased and displeased with the same beings, and their actions,

They make him an infinite good father, but who avenges himself without measure. They make of him a monarch infinitely just, but who confounds the innocent with the guilty, who has mingled injustice and cruelty, in causing his own son to be put to death to expiate the crimes of the human kind ; though they are incessantly sinning and repenting for pardon.

They make of him a being full of wisdom and foresight, yet insensible to the folly and short-sightedness of mortals. They make him a reasonable being who becomes angry at the thoughts of his creatures, though involuntary, and consequently necessary ; thoughts which he himself puts into their heads ; and who condemns them to eternal punishments if they believe not in reveries that are incompatible with the divine attributes, or who dare to doubt whether God can possess qualities that are not capable of being reconciled among themselves.

Is it then, surprising that so many good people are shocked at the revolting ideas, so contradictory and so appalling, which hurl mortals into a state of uncertainty and doubt as to the existence of the Deity, or even to force them into absolute denial of the same. — It is impossible to admit in effect, the doctrine of the deity of priestcraft, in which we constantly see infinite perfections, allied with imperfections the most striking ; in which, when we reflect but momentarily, we shall find that it cannot produce but disorder in the imagination, and leaves it wandering among errors that reduce it to despair, or some impostors, who, to subjugate mankind, have wished to throw them

into embarrassment, confound their reason, and fill them with terror. Such appears in effect, to be the motives of those who have the arrogance to pretend to a secret knowledge, which they distribute among mankind, though they have no knowledge even of themselves. They always paint God under the traits of an inaccessible tyrant, who never shows himself but to his ministers and favourites, who please to veil him from the eyes of the vulgar ; and who are violently irritated when they find any who oppose their pretensions, or when they refuse to believe the priests and their unintelligible farragoes.

If, as I have often said, it be impossible to believe what we cannot comprehend, or to be intimately convinced of that of which we can form no distinct and clear ideas, we may thence conclude that, when the Christians assure us they believe that God has announced himself in some secret and peculiar way to them that he has not done to other men, either they are themselves deceived, or they wish to deceive us. — Their faith, or their belief in God, is merely an acceptance of what their priests have taught them of a Being whose existence they have rendered more than doubtful to those who would reason and meditate. The Deity cannot, assuredly, be the being whom the Christians admit on the word of their theologians. ; Is there, in good truth, a man in the world, who can form any idea of a spirit ? If we ask the priests what a spirit is, they will tell us, that a spirit is an immaterial being who has none of the passions of which men are the subjects. But ; what is an immaterial

spirit? It is a being that has none of the qualities which we can fathom; that has neither form, nor extension, nor colour.

But how can we be assured of the existence of a being who has none of these qualities? It is by *faith*, say the priests, that we must be assured of his existence. But what is this *faith*? It is to adhere, without examination, to what the priests tell us. But what is it the priests tell us of God? They tell us of things which we can neither comprehend nor reconcile among themselves. The existence, even of God, has, in their hands, become the most impenetrable mystery in religion. But do the priests themselves, comprehend this ineffable God, whom they announce to other men? Have they just ideas of him? Are they themselves sincerely convinced of the existence of a being who unites incompatible qualities which reciprocally exclude the one or the other? We cannot admit it; and we are authorised to conclude, that when the priests profess to believe in God, either they know not what they say, or they wish to deceive us.

Do not then be surprised, Madam, if you should find that there are, in fact, people who have ventured, to doubt, of the existence of the Deity of the theologians, because, on meditating on the descriptions given of him, they have discovered them to be incomprehensible, or replete with contradiction. Do not be astonished if they never listen, in reasoning, to any arguments that oppose themselves to common sense, and seek, for the existence of the priest's deity, other proofs than have yet been offered mankind. His existence

cannot be demonstrated in revelations, which we discover on examination, to be the work of imposture; revelations sap the foundations laid down for belief in a Divinity, which they would wish to establish. This existence cannot be founded on the qualities which our priests have assigned to the Divinity, seeing, that in the association of these qualities, there only results a God whom we cannot comprehend, and by consequence of whom, we can form no certain ideas. This existence cannot be founded on the moral qualities which our priests attribute to the Divinity, seeing these are irreconcilable in the same subject, who cannot be at once good and evil, just and unjust, merciful and implacable, wise and the enemy of human reason.

¿ On what, then, ought we to found the existence of God? The priests, themselves, tell us, that it is on reason, the spectacle of nature, and on the marvellous order which appears in the universe. Those to whom these motives for believing in the existence of the Divinity, do not appear convincing, find not, in any of the religions in the world, motives more persuasive; for all systems of theology, framed for the exercise of the imagination, plunge us into more uncertainty respecting their evidence, when they appeal to nature for proofs of what they advance.

¿ What then, are we to think of the God of the clergy? ¿ Can we think that he exists, without reasoning on that existence? ¿ And what shall we think of those who are ignorant of this God, or have no belief in his existence; who cannot discover him in the works of nature, either as

good or evil ; who behold only order and disorder succeeding alternately ? ; What idea shall we form of those men who regard matter as eternal, as actuated on by laws peculiar to itself ; as sufficiently powerful to produce itself under all the forms we behold ; as perpetually exerting itself in nourishing and destroying itself, in combining and dissolving itself ; as incapable of love or of hatred, as deprived of the faculties of *intelligence* and *sentiment* known to belong to beings of our species, but capable of supporting those beings whose organization has made them intelligent, sensible, and reasonable ?

; What shall we say of those Freethinkers who find neither good nor evil, neither order nor disorder in the universe ; that all things are but relative to different conditions of beings, of which they have evidence ; and that all that happens in the universe is necessary, and subjected to destiny ? In a word, ; what shall we think of these men ?

; Shall we say that they have only a different manner of viewing things, or that they use different words in expressing themselves ? - They call that *Nature* which others call the *Divinity* ; they call that *Necessity*, which all others call the *Divine decrees* ; they call that the *Energy of Nature*, which others call the *Author of Nature* ; they call that *Destiny* or *Fate*, which others call *God*, whose laws are always going forward.

; Have we, then, any right to hate and to exterminate them ? No, without doubt ; at least, we cannot admit that we have any reason that those should perish, who speak only the same

language with ourselves, and who are reciprocally beneficial to us. Nevertheless, it is to this degree of extravagance that the baneful ideas of religion have carried the human mind.—Harrassed and set on by their priests, men have hated and assassinated each other, because that in religious matters they agree not to one creed. Vanity has made some imagine that they are better than others, more intelligible, although they see that theology is a language which they neither understand, nor which they themselves could invent. The very name of Freethinker, suffices to irritate them, and to arm the fury of others, who repeat, without ceasing, the name of God, without having any precise idea of the Deity. If, by chance, they imagine that they have any notions of him, they are only confused, contradictory, incompatible, and senseless notions, which have been inspired in their infancy by their priests, and those who, as we have seen, have painted God in all those traits which their imagination furnished, or those who appear more conformed to their passions and interests, than to the well-being of their fellow-creatures.

The least reflection will, nevertheless, suffice to make any one perceive, that God, if he is just and good, cannot exist as a being known to some, but unknown to others. If Freethinkers are men void of reason, God would be unjust to punish them for being blind and insensible, or for having too little penetration and understanding to perceive the force of those natural proofs on which the existence of the Deity has been founded. A God full of equity cannot punish men for having

— been blind or devoid of reason. The Freethinkers, as foolish as they are supposed, are beings less insensible than those who make professions of believing in a God full of qualities that destroy one another; they are less dangerous than the adorers of a changeable Deity, who, they imagine, is pleased with the extermination of a large portion of mankind, on account of their opinions. Our speculations are indifferent to God, whose glory man cannot tarnish—whose power mortals cannot abridge. They may, however, be advantageous to ourselves; they may be perfectly indifferent to Society, whose happiness they may not affect; or they may be the reverse of all this. For it is evident that the opinions of men do not influence the happiness of society.

— Hence, Madam, let us leave men to think as they please; provided that they act in such a manner as promotes the general good of society. The thoughts of men injure not others; their actions may—their reveries never. Our ideas, our thoughts, our systems, depend not on us. He who is fully convinced on one point, is not satisfied on another. — All men have not the same eyes, nor the same brains; all have not the same ideas, the same education, or the same opinions; they never agree wholly, when they have the temerity to reason on matters that are enveloped in the obscurity of imaginative fiction, and which cannot be subject to the usual evidence accompanying matters of report, or historic relation.

Men do not long dispute on objects that are cognizable to their senses, and which they can submit to the test of experience. The number

of self-evident truths on which men agree is very small. And the fundamentals of morality are among this number. It is obvious to all men of sense, that beings, united in society, require to be regulated by justice, that they ought to respect the happiness of each other, that mutual succour is indispensable ; in a word, that they are obliged to practice virtue, and to be useful to society, for personal happiness. It is evident to demonstration, that the interest of our preservation excites us to moderate our desires, and put a bridle on our passions ; to renounce dangerous habits, and to abstain from vices which can only injure our fortune, and undermine our health.— These truths are evident to every being whose passions have not dominion over his reason : they are totally independent of theological speculations, which, have neither evidence nor demonstration, and which our mind can never verify ; they have nothing in common with the religious opinions, on which the imagination soars from earth to sky, nor with the fanaticism and credulity, which are so frequently producing among mankind the most opposite principles to morality and the well-being of society.

They who are of the Freethinkers' opinions, are not more dangerous than they who are of the priests' opinions. — In short, Christianity has produced effects more appalling than heathenism.— The speculative principles of the Freethinkers, have done no injury to society ; the contagious principles of fanaticism and enthusiasm, have only served to spread disorder on the earth.

If there are dangerous notions and fatal specu-

lations in the world, they are those of the devotees, who obey a religion that divides men, and excites their passions, and who sacrifice the interests of society, of sovereigns, and their subjects to their own ambition, their avarice, their vengeance and fury.

There is no question that the Freethinker has motives to be good, even though he admit not notions that bridle his passions. It is true that the Freethinker has no invisible motives, but he has motives, and a visible restraint, which, if he reflects, cannot fail to regulate his actions. — If he doubts about religion, he does not question the laws of moral obligation ; nor that it is his duty to moderate his passions, to labour for his happiness, and that of others, to avoid hatred, disdain, and discord as crimes ; and that he should shun vices which may injure his constitution, reputation, and fortune.

Thus relatively to his morality, the Freethinker has principles more sure than those of superstition and fanaticism. In fine, if nothing can restrain the Freethinker, a thousand forces united, would not prevent the fanatic from the commission of crimes, and the violation of duties the most sacred.

Besides, I believe that I have already proved that the morality of superstition has no certain principles ; that it varies with the interests of the priests, who explain the intentions of the Divinity, as they find these accordant or discordant to their views and interests ; which, ; alas ! are too often the result of cruel and wicked purposes.— On the contrary, the Freethinker, who has no

morality but what he draws from the nature and character of man, and the constant events which transpire in society, has a certain morality that is not founded either on the caprice of circumstances, or the prejudices of mankind ; a morality that tells him when he does evil, and blames him for the evil so done, and that is superior to the morality of the intolerant fanatic and persecutor.

You thus perceive, Madam, on which side the morality of the Freethinkers leans, what advantages it possesses over that inculcated on the superstitious devotee, who knows no other rule than the caprice of his priest, nor any other morality than what suits the interest of the clergy, nor any other virtues than such as make him the slave of their will, and which are too often in opposition to the great interests of mankind.— Thus you perceive that what is understood by the natural morality of the Freethinker, is much more constant, and more sure than that of the superstitious, who believe they can render themselves agreeable to God by the intercession of priests. If the Freethinker is blind or corrupted, by not knowing his duties which nature prescribes to him, it is precisely in the same way as the superstitious, whose invisible motives and sacred guides prevent him not from going occasionally astray.

These reflections will serve to confirm what I have already said, to prove that morality has nothing in common with religion ; and that religion is its own enemy, though it pretends to dispense with support from other sources. True morality is founded on the nature of man ; the

morality of religion is founded only on the chimeras of imagination, and on the caprice of those who speak of the Deity in a language too often contrary to nature and right reason.

Allow me then, Madam, to repeat to you, that morality is the only natural religion for man; the only object worthy his notice on earth, the only worship which he is required to render to the Deity. It is uniform and replete with obvious duties which rest not on the dictation of priests, blabbing chit-chat they do not understand. ; If it be this morality which I have defined, that makes us what we are, ought we not to labour strenuously for the happiness of our race? If it be this morality that makes us reasonable, that enables us to distinguish good from evil, the useful from the hurtful; that makes us sociable, and enables us to live in society to receive and repay mutual benefits; we ought at least to respect all those who are its friends.

If it be this morality which sets bounds to our temper, it is that which interdicts the commission in thought, word, or action, of what would injure another, or disturb the happiness of society. If it attach us to the preservation of all that is dear to us, it points out how by a certain line of conduct we may preserve ourselves; for its laws, clear and of easy practice, inflict on those who disobey them instant punishment, fear and remorse; on the other hand, the observance of its duties is accompanied with immediate and real advantages, and notwithstanding the depravity which prevails on earth, vice always finds itself punished, and virtue is not always deprived of

the satisfaction it yields, of the esteem of men, and the recompence of society ; even if men are in other respects unjust, they will concede to the virtuous the due meed of praise.

Behold, Madam, to what the dogmas of natural religion reduce us : in meditating on it, and in practising its duties, we shall be truly religious, and filled with the spirit of the Divinity ; we shall be admired and respected by men, we shall be in the right way to be loved by those who rule over us, and respected by those who serve us ; we shall be truly happy in this world, and we shall have nothing to fear in the next.

These are laws so clear, so demonstrable, and whose infraction is so evidently punished : whose observance is so surely recompensed, that they constitute the code of nature of all living beings, sentiment and reasoning, all acknowledge their authority ; all find in them the evidence of Deity, and consider those as sceptics who doubt their efficacy. The Freethinker does not refuse to acknowledge as fundamental laws, those which are obviously founded on the God of Nature, and on the immutable and necessary circumstances of things cognizable to the faculties of sentient natures. The Indian, the Chinese, the savage, perceives these self-evident laws, whenever he is not carried headlong by his passions into crime and error. In fine, these laws, so true, and so evident, never can appear uncertain, obscure, or false, as are those superstitious chimeras of the imagination which knaves have substituted for the truths of nature, and the dicta of common sense ; and those devotees who know no

other laws than those of the caprices of their priests, necessarily obey a morality little calculated to produce personal or general happiness, but much calculated to lead to extravagance and inconvenient practices.

Hence, charming Eugenia, you will allow mankind to think as they please, and judge of them after their actions. — Oppose reason to their systems, when they are pernicious to themselves or others ; remove their prejudices if you can, that they may not become the victims of their caprices, show them the truth which may always remove error ; banish from their minds the fictions which disturb them ; advise them not to meditate on the mysteries of their priests ; bid them renounce all those illusions they have substituted for morality ; and advise them to turn their thoughts on that which conduces to their happiness. Meditate yourself on your own nature, and the duties which it imposes on you. Fear those chastisements which follow inattention to this law. Be ambitious to be approved by your own understanding, and you will rarely fail to receive the applauses of the human kind, as a good member of society.

If you wish to meditate, think with the greatest strength of your mind on your nature. Never abandon the torch of reason ; cherish truth sincerely. When you are in uncertainty, pause, or follow what appears the most probable, always abandoning opinions that are destitute of foundation, or evidence of their truth and benefit to society. Then will you, in good truth, yield to the impulse of your heart when reason is your guide ;

then will you consult in the calmness of passion, and counsel yourself on the advantages of virtue, and the consequences of its want ; and you may flatter yourself that you cannot be displeasing to a wise God, though you disbelieve absurdities, nor agreeable to a good God in doing things hurtful to yourself or to others.

I am, Madam, &c.

D'HOLBACH.

THE END.

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